

CAMP FIRE BOYS at LOG CABIN BEND



OLIVER LEE CLIFTON



Class PZ.7

Book R19

Copyright N^o Cab

COPYRIGHT DEPOSIT





A guest at the campfire.

(Frontispiece)

THE CAMP FIRE BOYS

AT

LOG CABIN BEND

OR

Four Chums Afoot in the Tall Timber

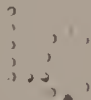
BY

St. George, B. H. Clifton
OLIVER LEE CLIFTON *pres.*

**AUTHOR OF "CAMP FIRE BOYS IN MUSKRAT
SWAMP," "CAMP FIRE BOYS AT SILVER
FOX FARM," ETC.**

ILLUSTRATED BY

CHARLES L. WRENN



PUBLISHERS

BARSE & HOPKINS

NEW YORK, N. Y.

NEWARK, N. J.

PZ 7
R 19
C 6

Copyright, 1923
By BARSE & HOPKINS



PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

APR -7 '23

© C1 A 6 9 8 8 9 5

1001

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. AT NIGHTFALL IN THE BIG WOODS	9
II. THE FIRST CAMPFIRE	17
III. THE CHUM BELOVED	28
IV. UNEXPECTED VISITORS	39
V. ALL BUSY AS BEAVERS	47
VI. THE EVENTS OF A DAY	56
VII. THE CLIMBER OF THE BEECH TREE	66
VIII. AMOS'S STRANGE ACTIONS	77
IX. THE RIGHT KIND OF PALS	86
X. AMOS DECIDES	96
XI. CLEARING SKIES	105
XII. SETTING THE TRAP	114
XIII. THE AWAKENING OF PERK	123
XIV. A STIRRING NIGHT AHEAD	133
XV. CAUGHT IN THE STORM	140
XVI. WHERE WOODCRAFT PAYS	149
XVII. A GUEST AT THE CAMPFIRE	158
XVIII. ELMER HAS A PLAN	165
XIX. THE LONG, LONG NIGHT	175

CHAPTER	PAGE
XX. ONCE MORE ON THE TRAIL . . .	184
XXI. "TOOT—TOOT—T-O-OOT!" . . .	193
XXII. NOT SO SLOW, AFTER ALL . . .	200
XXIII. WHAT PERK DID . . .	210
XXIV. WHEN THE SUN BROKE THROUGH .	217
XXV. BACK AT THE CABIN AGAIN . . .	229
XXVI. LOOKING FORWARD—CONCLUSION .	237

ILLUSTRATIONS

A guest at the campfire . . .	<i>Frontispiece</i>
“A whopping big cat, for a fact!” . . .	^{PAGE} 19
His method of descending the tree was ex- ceedingly clumsy	71
Mr. Codling found the litter much more comfortable	245

THE CAMP FIRE BOYS AT LOG CABIN BEND

CHAPTER I

AT NIGHTFALL IN THE BIG WOODS

“How far have we hiked, Elmer, would you say?”

“About twelve miles, at a rough guess, Perk.”

“Huh! then we ought to be close to the ford, where this old river road crosses to the east shore of the Beaverkill, eh, Elmer?”

“If you listen carefully, Perk, you’ll hear the gurgle of the water among the stepping-stones that lie at the upper edge of Galloway’s Ford.”

“That’s a fact; and say, I might have noticed it before now, only I was so busy watching some honey-bees working in the wild flowers alongside the road, and wondering if we’d be lucky enough to run across their hive, away up in the top of some hollow tree. Wow! the very idea makes my mouth water.”

“Well, once across the river and we’ll have about four miles more to tramp before we can pitch camp; is that O.K., Elmer?”

“A close guess for you, Wee Willie; but over a rough trail instead of this fairly decent road. Above the ford on this side there’s just a tote-road leading up to Si. Keck’s deserted lumber camp that lies, you remember, on the edge of Muskrat Swamp. This road crosses to the other side, and runs to Crawford Notch, ten miles away.”

“Huh!”

The chap who uttered this last exclamation half belligerently was what you might call a “horrible example” of the folly often displayed by boys when clapping a “nick-name” on some unsuspecting comrade.

Really “Wee Willie” was a full head taller than any one of his three chums, having possibly “shot up” overnight when about fourteen, as often happens—he was three years past that age now.

Perhaps at one time young Winkleman may have seemed puny and undersized, so that he really merited the queer sobriquet his mates had fastened upon him. But nowadays it seemed ab-

solutely ridiculous, and few ever used it save when accompanied by a whimsical grin that must have become exceedingly annoying to the tall, angular, sandy-haired and freckled youth; more especially since he had of late been taking girls to country barn-dances.

The boy named "Perk," really Aloysius Green Perkins, a rosy-faced, genial-looking, and altogether wholesome chap, whom everybody liked, once more spoke up. He was wheezing, being a bit stout of build, and frequently mopped his face with a suspiciously dingy-looking red bandanna; for the summer day had been rather warm, and each fellow carried quite a weighty pack on his back.

"I'm more than sorry I kept you waiting for me, because I wanted to see my dad when his train came in; but I had an important message for him, you know. So I guess it's my fault if we have to make the last lap of our big hike after night sets in."

"We should worry a whole lot about that!" disdainfully chortled the tall tramper. "Here's Elmer got his fine pocket flashlight along; and besides, if we feel like it we can hold up a bit, and wait for the old moon to come along. She's due

shortly after dark sets in, you remember, fellows, being just past the full stage."

"You've said it, Wee Willie," remarked Elmer; "and we ought to be good for a few more miles."

"Huh!" grunted the tall chap, just as before, as though the mention of that name grated on his nerves.

"Sure thing," assented Perk, sturdily, though at the time it is possible his plump lower limbs were feeling more or less "wobbly" under him.

"Here's the ford, and now to cross over," remarked the fourth member of the party, Amos Codling by name, who was rather a newcomer in Chester; though ever since his advent, some six months previous, he and Elmer Kitching had been fast friends after a sort of David and Jonathan fashion.

The Beaverkill was not at a high stage, owing to summer droughts, but made up for this by being unusually noisy at the point where its waters ran past the "stepping stones," forming eddies, and pools of foam-crested water.

The four chums proceeded to cross over. As a rule they were nimblefooted, and found little trouble in springing from rock to rock. Once, however, fat Perk came near slipping into the

“drink,” when he made a little miscalculation. However, it happened that wise Elmer had been “keeping tabs” on the movements of the other, and managed to throw out a helping hand just in the nick of time.

So at last they reached the other shore. Perk was heard to draw a long breath as of real relief; for he believed he had just had a narrow escape from taking an involuntary bath, in which his pack must have been thoroughly soaked as well as himself.

“Now we leave the Crawford Notch road, and take to the trail that leads to Log Cabin Bend above here,” announced Elmer, who seemed to be looked upon as a leader among his mates.

“I reckon now this might be your old trail,” mentioned Wee Willie, as he pointed indifferently down at his feet.

Elmer agreed with him, for the “signs” were all there. And so without wasting any time in argument they started off in single file, with Perk fetching up the rear.

Already the sun was low down, and night could not be far distant. The trees up in this region were unusually tall, for the lumberman had not as yet attacked the eastern side of the Beaverkill.

“Say, let me tell you, it’s going to be some gloomy around here pretty soon,” observed the tall boy, after they had been tramping in this fashion for at least fifteen minutes, keeping up quite a lively pace.

Amos sighed, as though he might be carrying a little more than his share of boyish troubles himself; at which Elmer half turned his head to glance uneasily at his chum; doubtless wondering what it could be that of late was making the other seem so heavy-hearted.

They continued to plunge along, Elmer setting the pace. Already two of the four miles had been left behind them, a fact that Perk heard the leader state with much joy, though he only grunted in his peculiar way.

“Hope you don’t lose touch with this blinky old trail, Elmer,” suggested Wee Willie, apparently with a motive in view.

“That would be pretty tough on us, for a fact,” chuckled the other; “and as it’s getting to be something of a strain on my eyes to pick my way, I reckon it’s time we had a little artificial help.”

With that there immediately sprang into existence a glow from his electric flashlight that brightly illuminated the forest ahead.

“That’s the ticket!” ejaculated the relieved Perk as they continued to move along their way, winding in among the aisles of the tall timber, but in the main keeping toward the north.

“I understand there’s some sort of queer history connected with this old abandoned cabin at the big bend of the river; do you happen to know anything about it, Elmer?” asked Amos, presently.

“Oh! I’ve heard some strange things about it,” came the quick reply; “but I’m not feeling just in the humor to mention any of the same right now. They’ll keep until some evening, when we’re sitting around the fire, and spinning yarns.”

“Some of them are just *awful*,” Perk was heard remarking from a little distance in the rear, for at times he seemed to lag more or less; “but of course I never take much stock in such old women stories.”

“All the same there *was* some sort of tragedy took place—” began Wee Willie, when Elmer stopped him short by saying:

“Drop that, old fellow; we said we’d avoid any and all unpleasant subjects for to-night, when all of us are feeling a bit tired and grumpy. Let’s figure out what sort of supper we’d enjoy most

when we arrive. I always look forward to the first meal in camp."

"And the next one, too," sighed Perk.

That started them on a congenial topic always deeply absorbing to healthy and hungry lads; and they continued to lay out a program which, had it been carried through in its entirety, must have made serious inroads in the limited stock of provisions carried on their backs.

Later on they relapsed into silence again, being pretty well worn out and in need of refreshment. It was about this time that all of them received a sudden rude shock when there came a savage snarl; and as Elmer threw his light to the quarter whence came the significant sound they discovered a crouching figure on the low limb of a tree under which the winding trail to Log Cabin Bend apparently ran.

CHAPTER II

THE FIRST CAMPFIRE

“OH! what’s that?” gasped Perk.

“Stand perfectly still, everybody, or he may jump at us!” commanded the leader.

“A whopping big cat, for a fact!” muttered Wee Willie, fumbling about his waist, where he usually carried a homely so-called “hunting knife” in a leather sheath, when on the hike.

“See his yellow and green eyes, will you!” muttered Amos. “He acts as if as mad as hops because we came along. What ails him, do you think, Elmer?”

“I couldn’t say,” replied the other, softly, “unless this one happens to be a mother cat, with kits somewhere close by. They say such a varmint is always doubly dangerous to a man in the woods, especially after nightfall sets in.”

“What’ll we do about it—back out?” came in Perk’s quavering voice.

“I’d hate to do that, for fear of losing the trail,” said Elmer.

“But we’d get clawed up something fierce, wouldn’t we, if it came to a fight with the savage critter? Just listen to the snarls, will you?” the stout boy went on to say.

“Hold on!” suddenly remarked Amos; “leave it all to me, and I think I can do the business. Just keep quiet for a minute or so, and then see what’s going to happen.”

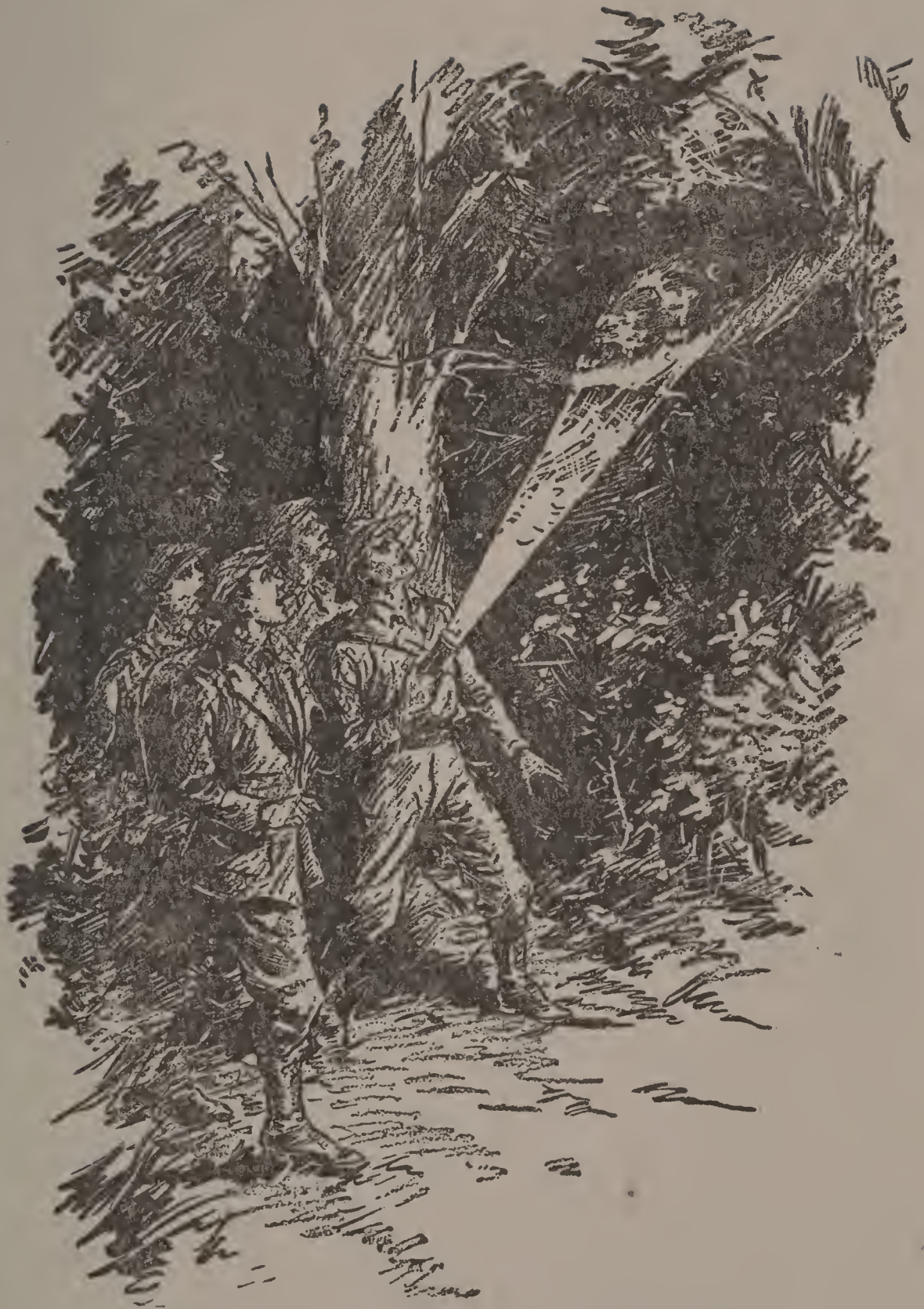
He was heard fumbling with some of the stuff he carried.

“You haven’t got a gun along now, have you, Amos?” asked Perk, with possible visions of a wounded wildcat charging them, and committing more or less scratching and biting before giving up the ghost.

“Something a heap better’n that,” panted Amos, himself excited for fear the enraged beast might leap before he got his plans ready for carrying out. “There, now I’ve got the thing loose; give me just time enough to put a cartridge in place. Don’t be startled, fellows, when I pull the trigger. It’s my camera flashlight I’m going to work on the old rascal. Steady now!”

“Oh!” gasped Perk, comprehendingly.

Even as he made this sound there came a dazzling flare that caused every one to blink as if



"A whopping big cat, for a fact!"

half blinded; indeed, a flash of lightning could not have had a more startling effect.

“He jumped!” cried Perk, “but away from us! You certainly gave him the scare of his life, Amos, with your bully camera outfit. Let’s be pushing along, boys; somehow I don’t quite like this section of woods very much.”

No one made any objection, and so the march was resumed. It might have been noticed, however, that Perk made it a point not to lag behind. He was continually imagining he saw crouching figures on many a low hanging limb when Elmer’s light moved this way and that.

So they proceeded until finally Elmer announced that according to his belief they were close to their destination.

“Thank you for saying that, Elmer,” remarked Perk, whole-heartedly, as if he had never listened to more delightful words.

“Yes, here’s the river on our left,” added Wee Willie, encouragingly; “and it looks to me as if we might be rounding the bend right now.”

“Just what we are,” affirmed Amos. “A bit back we were heading due east, and now our course is almost north.”

“Well, there’s the old moon going peeking up

on the right," Perk commented, cheerily. "I can't remember a time I felt happier to glimpse her smiling face. I'm tired of seeing things lying in wait for us. Ugh!"

Indeed, all of them felt somewhat the same way, so that when the moon was discovered through the aisles of the forest her appearance was greeted joyfully.

"Keep your eyes on the lookout for any signs of the old cabin," Elmer warned his three chums. "It would be a joke on us if we went past without discovering it. But I've a notion this dim trail ought to lead straight to the door."

Accordingly four pairs of eager eyes kept on the alert every minute of the time, and presently Wee Willie, who possessed remarkably keen vision, made an eager announcement.

"There, over a little to the left—I'm sure it must be a shack under that big tree!" he hastened to say.

"Something moved just then; didn't you see it slip away?" Perk added in a thrilling whisper.

"You're still dreaming of cats by the whole-sale, Perk!" chided the tall chum, disdainfully.

"It was *something* that seemed to double over, and disappear back in the shadows!" sturdily de-

clared the stout boy; "mebbe only a dog, though!"

"And what would any dog be doing away up here?" demanded Wee Willie.

"Well, I've heard of wild dogs, that have run away from some farm, and taken to living like their ancestors did by the chase," Perk maintained.

"You only imagined you saw something, so forget it, please," the other assured him. "Now, here's the cabin, let's see what she looks like, Elmer!"

By making good use of his little hand torch the leader was able to do as requested. They all stared eagerly, and then Wee Willie gave vent to a grunt of disappointment.

"Huh! a rickety old shack it is, believe me, boys!" he grumbled. "The door hangs on one rusty hinge; and it looks to me as if the roof might be as full of holes as a housewife's sieve. Say, just imagine a bally storm hitting us when cooped up in this rotten crib! We'd get soaked to the bone, chances are. I think we'd be sensible to make a brush shanty. Besides, now, I wouldn't be surprised if the old cabin was haunted."

"Oh! what makes you believe so?" demanded the thrilled Perk, his thoughts possibly flying back to the flitting shadow he believed he had de-

tected at the time of their arrival on the scene.

“Never mind what he says, Perk,” soothed Elmer. “Here’s the cabin, and if it is rather dilapidated, what’s to hinder our mending the roof to-morrow, I’d like to know? Not much sign of rain to-night, as far as I can see.”

“It’s all right, boys,” Amos now went on to say, cheerily; “let’s go inside and get shut of these pesky packs. My shoulders feel raw from carrying such a load for miles and miles. Mine must weigh twice as much as when we started out.”

“Oh, easily four times that,” chanted Perk, eagerly. “There’s one good thing, though, they’ll be heaps and heaps lighter going back home.”

“Sure thing, if your appetite is what it’s usually been, Perk,” chuckled Wee Willie, as he pushed after Elmer, who had started to enter the abandoned cabin.

“Drop the things here, and let’s get a fire started as soon as we can,” suggested Elmer.

“Indoors or out?” demanded Wee Willie, as though by rights he took that order on his shoulders; for it happened that he had long been known as a veritable “crank” when it came to building fires, and could manage to accomplish this result

without the use of matches in half a dozen different ways, some of them really wonderful.

“Outside for this time might be better, as the night is so warm, and we don’t want to take chances of burning our shelter down about our ears,” he was told.

That was enough for the tall chum, who tossing down his pack borrowed Elmer’s hand torch so as to be able to gather some wood, and passing out, proceeded to business. Perk pulled out a fragment of a candle, purloined from home, which he lighted, and set on the gaping hearth.

“It isn’t much of a glim, but better than nothing at all,” he hastened to say in apology. “I always carry some fag-ends of candles when I’m out camping; you never know when you’ll need such things in a hurry. Whew! so this is the shack that gave the place the name of Log Cabin Bend? You c’n see the stars through the holes in the roof, for a fact.”

“We’ll mend that in the morning, Perk, so quit poking fun at our palatial abode,” chided Amos. “And if you asked me, I’d say there’s no apparent reason why we shouldn’t make ourselves mighty comfy here, given a little time, and some elbow grease.”

Already had the fire-maker managed to start his blaze, though likely enough he did not scorn to make use of a plain everyday match on this special occasion, knowing it was hardly the time for any "fiddling" with tedious methods of inducing a spark, coaxed into being by means of flint and steel, or some other aboriginal method of procedure.

As the flames leaped up, seizing on the dry wood Wee Willie had arranged so cleverly, the glow attracted the others, who came trooping out, showing by their actions how pleased they were to be finally free from their burdens.

"The first campfire for this outing!" remarked Perk, his round face aglow, while his eyes sparkled with satisfaction. "And how long will it be before your fire is fit for cooking over, Wee Willie?"

The other gave him a queer look, and seemed on the point of saying something sharp, but restrained himself.

"Right soon, so you might as well be getting the ham and eggs and coffee out of the packs, fellows. Say, I'm as hungry as a homeless dog; so be sure you cook double rations, Perk."

"Leave that to me," chuckled the other, ambling back inside the cabin in order to round up the

necessary cooking implements and then root out the ingredients of the first meal in camp.

Elmer walked about meanwhile as though investigating the surroundings, so as to figure on what they would find it necessary to do in order to make the old shack habitable. Several times Wee Willie glanced toward the other as though he might have something on his mind. Finally he arose from his knees and joined Elmer.

“Noticed you sniffing like you suspected there might be a skunk in the offing?” he finally remarked. “Fact is, I thought myself there was a queer kind of odor around here, inside the cabin in particular.”

“That’s the idea I had,” assented Elmer, softly, “but this isn’t anything in the line of a polecat; if you asked me I’d say it was some sort of villainous tobacco, such as a tramp might pick up in a wayside field, and smoke in his pipe as he lay around after his supper!”

“By George, fellows! there goes somebody now! I’m *sure* I saw him this time!” said Perk excitedly, coming through the door and pointing through a dusky lane of trees. “Now tell me again that I am only imagining things!”

CHAPTER III

THE CHUM BELOVED

AFTER all Elmer's effort to keep his voice down when talking to the tall chum, Perk had heard what was said. He happened to be coming out of the door just at that moment, as luck would have it, and so caught the full significance of the remark. But try as they might, no one else saw the lurking figure he again pointed out.

"I guess you score, Perk," admitted the one addressed, for whatever Wee Willie had in the way of faults, and he was not by any means perfect, he never failed to make amends when an occasion arose for it.

"What's all the talk about, I want to know?" demanded Amos, showing up just then, and with all a natural boy's curiosity aroused.

"Why, Elmer was just saying, and I agreed with him," explained the tall pal, "that there was an odor of stale tobacco smoke hanging around this old cabin. He thinks it may have been some wandering tramp who put up here for the night."

"But," interposed Perk, "why should he skip

out so quick when he heard us coming along the trail, or else caught the glimmer of Elmer's torch? You'd think the poor chap'd feel mighty lonely, away off the beaten track of his kind, and be glad of our company."

"Which remark shows how little you know of the hobo tribe in general," chuckled the angular boy. "Most of the Weary Willies are born thieves, and only want a chance to steal to let themselves out."

"Many are, anyhow," admitted the more conservative Elmer, "and for all we know, this fellow has done something that makes him afraid of officers of the Law."

"But he may come back again?" hazarded Perk, dubiously, a cloud beginning to gather upon his forehead, as though some of his expectations of a carefree holiday had received a sudden and unexpected backset.

"That's true enough for you, Perk," agreed the grinning Wee Willie; "but take my word for it, if he does it'll not be to make our acquaintance."

"What then?" asked the other, quickly, looking worried still.

"Oh! I reckon tramps have ferocious appetites, and get good and hungry," continued the tall

chum; "and if he hangs around for a bit he'll smell our jolly supper cooking, which ought to make him well-nigh frantic."

"Then you mean he may sneak back here during the night, with the idea of stealing some of our grub; is that it?" questioned Perk, his anxiety taking a new turn.

"It wouldn't surprise me much if he did," coolly observed Wee Willie.

"But you're only guessing it was a tramp," said Amos just then.

"Why, yes, that's a fact," admitted Elmer. "To be sure the man might be something entirely different from a hobo."

"As what, Elmer?" asked Perk.

"Oh! there are a number of answers to your question, Perk," the leader informed him. "For instance, this chap might be some fugitive from justice who had broken jail, and was in hiding."

"Yes, or even a lunatic at large," continued Wee Willie, perhaps amused to see how eagerly the other was swallowing all these suggestions; "for we happen to know such a thing did happen once, years back; for the State Asylum for the Insane is located not much more'n twenty miles northeast of our home town of Chester."

“Then there might be another explanation for his being here,” spoke up Amos. “I chanced to be talking with the head game warden only a week back, and he told me he had never known the game poachers so daring as this season. They have shot deer, snared partridge and rabbits out of season, and laid illegal set-lines for black bass in some of the best lakes of the county.”

“Yes,” Elmer added, thoughtfully, “it might be one of those bold game hogs who didn’t want to be seen up here, where he really had no right to be. But why bother our heads so about the fellow? He’s skipped out, and the chances are we’ll never glimpse hide nor hair of him again. Perk was the only one who got a peep at the slippery rascal.”

Accordingly the subject was dropped, for the time being at any rate; but Perk looked unusually grave as he proceeded to get supper, as though creeping, mysterious men kept looming up before his mental vision.

Indeed, doubtless the little mystery connected with the strange actions of the unknown would give each one of the boys cause for more or less reflection, and vague speculation.

The supper was voted a great success. Perk

prided himself on his ability as a cook; and since the others usually commended his efforts to the skies he almost always insisted on doing the lion's share of this work; to which of course no one objected in the least.

The sliced ham was browned to a nicety, the eggs, carefully packed so as not to be broken in transit, were "turned" or not, to suit the individual taste of each fellow; the coffee seemed like ambrosia, so fragrant and cheering did it appear; while the home-made bread, with genuine butter for a spread, added much to the enjoyment of their first meal in camp.

These four lads of Chester had been accustomed to similar outings during the summer holidays, and thus banded together called themselves the "Camp Fire Boys," a name that seemed to possess a certain charm in their eyes as it was bound always to recall the jolly times they had when camping out in company.

Elmer Kitching had always possessed an ardent love for everything connected with the Great Outdoors. He came by this nature honestly, for his father in his day had been a well-known naturalist, whom such famous men as Teddy Roosevelt himself, John Burroughs, and others along the same

line had been glad to consult when preparing articles for publication, in order to verify their own observations concerning animated nature.

His mother, now a widow, was comfortably well off, and Elmer had a young sister at home by the name of Rebecca.

Amos Codling lived with his mother and three younger children. They had not mingled very much with other folks since coming to Chester; the widow returned no calls, and seemed content to look after her family. Some were inclined to think this rather strange; but by degrees it became the conviction of her neighbors that she must have seen great trouble, and shrank from contact with the rough world. Her children were always well dressed, and bright in school; but even the town gossips could find out next to nothing about the previous history of the Codling family, save that they came from a big city.

Wee Willie Winkleman was the son of the owner of the finest motion picture theater in Chester. As has been stated before, his prevailing passion was the ambition to discover new and novel methods of making fires without the use of matches. That had become such a "fad" with the tall chum that he even dreamed about it, and had

been known to get up in the middle of the night to try out some queer scheme which had visited him in his sleep.

Perk, the beloved pal, was famous for his amiable disposition. Few fellows had ever seen him show a trace of anger. Indeed, his beaming smile could, the boys claimed, melt the flinty heart of almost any farmer around town; though this rule had its exceptions. Perk was frequently in trouble; likewise rosy-cheeked, and guileless, he was also addicted to straying from beaten paths in the woods, and getting lost; but never from the truth, since his word was as good as most fellows' bond. His father was a railroad engineer, and likewise rather ponderous of build.

As the evening crept along, Wee Willie every once in a while might have been noticed glancing sharply in the direction of Amos. It struck him that the other was acting unusually nervous, for he would get up and walk around for a minute or two, and then again throw himself down.

"Something must be bothering Amos, that's dead sure," the tall chum told himself; and at the same time determined to speak of the fact to Elmer if a chance offered.

He had never been quite as close to Amos as

Elmer, though for that matter it was extremely doubtful if even the latter had been taken into the confidence of the Codling boy, who knew how to keep a "close mouth," as Wee Willie called it.

"Still, it may be he's eaten too much supper, and his digestion is troubling him," was the final conclusion Wee Willie reached.

They sat around for some time, talking after their habit. It was hard to realize that they were all of sixteen miles from home, and surrounded by the primeval forest, up there in the Tall Timber, as that belt of the big wilderness was known.

"This just suits me to a dot," Wee Willie said for the fourth time as he poked at the fire, and sighed with complete happiness. "Guess I was just born to be a tramp, and make fires across the whole Continent, I love to hear the crackle of the flames so much."

"I'm really concerned about you sometimes, Wee Willie," said Elmer, pretending to look serious, though the sparkle in his gray eyes belied his words and manner. "If this craze for fires keeps up you'll be tempted to run with the machine; and then when there's a slacking up of business set a few haystacks ablaze just to keep your hand in."

“Not much I will,” retorted the other. “My fad is in inventing new and novel ways for *creating* fires. I consider a good blaze man’s best friend, when held in hand; let it break away, and I own up it may become his worst enemy. All good things can be abused, remember, and fire isn’t an exception to the general rule.”

“About time we looked after our beds, isn’t it?” asked Perk, accompanying his words with a tremendous yawn.

“Oh! that isn’t going to take much time,” scoffed Wee Willie, “seeing how we all share alike. It’s a hard bed for to-night, on the floor of the cabin. To-morrow we’ll hunt for hemlock browse, and ease things up. I’m the one who will suffer most, because my bones stick out so, without pads, like Perk here carries around with him.”

Amidst considerable merriment they soon laid out their double camping blankets, of a gray or dun color as most suitable for the purpose, and “less liable to show dirt spots,” as Perk always slyly claimed.

“It’s good night boys for me,” that individual was saying, as he stripped off his coat, kicked his shoes into a corner and commenced to crawl un-

der his warm woolen cover. "Say, this feels just great; you fellows'd better make up your minds to follow my example, and turn in."

He was sound asleep in less than ten minutes, when the others were ready to seek cover. Wee Willie stared down at his round moonlike face, and nodded his head as he turned to Elmer and Amos to say softly:

"Looks like a sweet cherub lying there, with such a happy smile on his mug. No use talking, Perk is the best-natured chap in seven counties. I've been mean enough more'n a few times to try my level best to make him mad, but had to give it up; he just looked at me, and kept on smiling until I had to turn and walk away bested; bless his big heart!"

Elmer nodded in approval of these words of appreciation, and Amos too showed that he echoed the sentiments expressed by the tall chum.

"I've known a lot of fellows," he went on to say, "but never his like. If all boys were built like good old Perk there'd be a heap less trouble in this world. I know I'd have been saved more or less suffering myself."

Wee Willie looked quickly at the speaker, as though he half expected Amos to take them into

his confidence; but instead the other simply bent down and started to push his extremities under his blanket.

The fire still burned without, and although the door was closed, Perk having succeeded in fastening it with a piece of stout rope, through innumerable apertures the flickering glow stole, making queer pictures on the wall beyond, that came and went like phantom drawings.

Elmer lay there and watched them for some time, his thoughts far afield, possibly in his Chester home with the dear ones there. Gradually his eyes closed and he lost track of even these precious ties in restful slumber.

Time passed by, several hours elapsing, when Elmer suddenly sat half-way up. Surely he had heard the yapping of a dog somewhere near by. This not only interested him but aroused an intense curiosity. Then he noticed that both Wee Willie and Amos also gave signs of being awake.

Now voices could be heard. They were heavy tones that came to Elmer's ears, as of mature men. Crunching footsteps followed, then a loud pounding,

"Open up here!" boomed a voice, followed by further sonorous knocks.

CHAPTER IV

UNEXPECTED VISITORS

“ALL right, dad; I’m up!”

That was Perk, who, aroused so suddenly by the racket doubtless imagined himself at home in his own bed, with his father rapping on the wall when the son indulged in his favorite habit of oversleeping mornings.

Elmer, Amos and Wee Willie were already on deck, having jumped to their feet in a hurry. The gruff voice seemed to be one invested with some degree of authority; it struck them all “in a heap,” as the tall chum afterwards described the sudden awakening.

Again came that loud thumping on the quivering door.

“Hurry up and open, do you hear?” rasped the voice, now with a touch of anger in the tones. “Don’t think you can escape, because we’ve got you cornered like a rat. Better be sensible, and go back with us!”

“Oh! my stars! who is it, and what *does* he mean?” gasped Perk, realizing at last that things

were quite different from what he had at first imagined.

Perk was really responsible for the fastened door. He had in his timidity pictured the frowsy tramp creeping back when they were all fast asleep, and perhaps almost cleaning out their limited supply of provisions, thus bringing the glorious camping trip to an untimely end; since four healthy boys could not be expected to stay up in the woods without sufficient "grub" to keep the wolf from the door.

So he had managed to make a shift with a piece of clothes-line (which was likely to be searched for in vain at home when next washday came along), securing the door so that it could not be opened from without unless by a display of extreme violence.

Elmer was by now across the cabin. He touched the planks of which the door was composed, to find them still quivering under the impact of the unknown party's knuckles.

"Wait a minute, and we'll open up; the door is fastened, don't you understand? Hold your horses, Mister; I'm undoing it right now!" he called out.

Immediately he caught the sound of voices again just beyond. Evidently the men, whoever

they might turn out to be, seemed astonished at something, perhaps disappointed in the bargain. Once more there also came to the ears of the boys the eager whining of a dog. Elmer imagined that this animal might have been partly responsible for the visit of these midnight prowlers

Perk gave a low cry as the door suddenly swung back under Elmer's push. The moon was shining brightly, and standing there in its mellow glow were two stalwart figures and a hound. The first thing Perk noticed was the fact that both men were garbed in some sort of uniform, with caps that bordered on the military.

Meanwhile the two men were bending forward and looking at the youthful group that filled the doorway of the cabin. One of them gave a grunt, and followed this with a scornful laugh that grated on the nerves like a file.

"There you are, Collins, with all your being so sure we'd find the tricky chap located here, just because his trail headed this way. Sold again, Elihu, and off the scent once more! Now perhaps you'll pay some attention to *my* plan of campaign, since yours has petered out so flat."

The other man continued to stare at Elmer and his mates.

“Who are you chaps anyway, and what’re you doing here?” he demanded.

“Oh! that’s easily explained,” said the Kitching boy cheerily. “We all belong in Chester, you see, and make up the Camp Fire Boys’ Club. Just now we are on one of our regular trips to the woods for sport, and to wind up the summer vacation. My name is Elmer Kitching, this is Amos Codling; the tall chum is a son of Caleb Winkleman who owns the classy motion picture theater in our town; and the last boy is Perk—his dad is an engineer on the B. & S. Railroad. Might I ask who you are, and what you expected to find here in this shack at Old Cabin Bend of the Beaverkill?”

“That’s a civil question, youngster, and since you’ve been so obliging, I don’t mind answering it. Me and my mate Andrews here are guards over at the big State Asylum for the Insane. A few days ago one of the inmates managed to escape, and we’ve been searching the whole countryside for him ever since. Our hound here found and lost his trail again and again in the queerest way ever. The last time he ran it out the fugitive was heading this way. Somehow I got a notion he must know about this old cabin here, and was making for it. You see I originally came from

Crawford Notch, and knew all about the deserted cabin up here. So I influenced my pal to drop around."

"Yes," broke in the man who had been called Andrews, "and when we caught the glimmer of a dying fire through the trees, Collins here was dead sure we'd treed our coon at last. But the game is all off again, it seems; and we can start in looking where we left off; warning the farmers as we go to keep their eyes peeled for a clever chap who'll hoodwink them with his blarney, if he gets half a chance."

"Thank you for telling us," said Elmer; "and in return let me say that when we struck this cabin some time after moonrise to-night, there was an odor of stale tobacco smoke hanging around inside. One of my chums here also declared he glimpsed some sort of figure bending over like an animal, and getting out of sight in a hurry!"

At hearing this the men both uttered exclamations that told of renewed interest. "That sounds interesting," said Collins, warmly. "It might be we can pick up a fresh trail around these diggings. About where was it he was seen?"

"Perk, step up here," said Elmer; "can you point out the spot for the gentlemen?"

“Sure thing, Elmer. There, over to the left yonder, see the tree that seems to bend over toward the southeast—it was right under that same I sighted a moving figure; but it flashed out of sight before I could rub my eyes twice to make sure.”

“That’s aplenty, Perk, and thank you,” said Collins, who seemed a pretty decent sort of a chap after all, though he must have been terribly disappointed when his theory turned to bitter fruit; his comrade’s jeers too had not added to his enjoyment of the situation.

“Let’s try the dog around that place,” immediately suggested the other man, plainly full of action. “If it’s our bird, Jock’ll soon give tongue, and lead us off right smart.”

“Our only play, I reckon,” agreed Collins. “So good night, boys; hope you have a bully time of it in camp; used to do that sort of thing myself years back, and know what it means. We’ll soon be clearing out of this region, hit or miss, so you won’t be pestered with our hound barking for long.”

Elmer and the others saw them hurry away with mingled emotions. Despite the fact that the night air seemed pretty chilly, and their garments exceedingly thin, they continued to huddle

in the open doorway, listening and watching.

Even Perk refused to go back again to his snug blanket so long as the other three remained there; and once Elmer heard him saying softly, as though to himself:

“Poor thing, just to think of him out of his mind, and wandering at large in these big woods, hungry, and without even a blanket to hug nights. I almost wish he’d crept in, and cribbed that last loaf of bread we fetched along.”

That was Perk all over, full of feeling for any one apt to be suffering; and it was this spirit of wanting to be of service that endeared him to the hearts of all his boy friends in Chester.

“There’s the hound picking up!” snapped Amos, suddenly.

“But you want to notice there isn’t a note of eagerness in his baying,” added Elmer, quickly. “If he’s found any sort of scent at all, it isn’t what he’s been searching for. You can even detect a sort of disappointed sound about his mournful notes.”

“That’s what!” echoed Wee Willie. “Either the lunatic has been too smart for the trackers, or else it wasn’t him after all, and the dog knows it.”

Elmer shut the door again, though only with

an effort, owing to its really dilapidated condition. And Perk, as if in duty bound, proceeded again to adjust his rope guard. It had served them one good turn already, he figured; because had those two guards burst suddenly in upon them, their consternation must have been many times aggravated.

“A nice state of affairs, I must say!” Wee Willie was grumbling. “We came all the way up here to camp in solitude and peace, and now see what we’re up against! Gee whiz! can you beat it?”

“No, but mebbe we’d better beat it for home,” Perk faintly suggested, as if even the thought gave him fresh pain.

“Here, none of that, Perk,” sternly rebuked Elmer. “We’re not the kind to be frightened off by such a silly little thing as that. We’ll stick it out, no matter what comes along!”

“Hear! hear!” came from Wee Willie; while Amos too added his voice to the chorus, and even Perk hastened to say:

“Oh! I didn’t really mean it, I assure you, boys, and you can believe me. I’ll hang on as long as the next one, no matter if the whole asylum breaks loose.”

CHAPTER V

ALL BUSY AS BEAVERS

It was some time before the boys could settle down again to sleep. Perk often believed he could catch a distant yap from the ranging hound, and it never failed to give him a thrill. The beast had seemed both big, and inclined to be savage; and Perk could not help shuddering to think of his getting loose from his leash and coming on the cringing lunatic somewhere in the lonely timber.

But finally even the anxious Perk succumbed, and when he again opened his eyes it was to find that daylight had come, with Elmer outside starting up the fire, and some one else rattling the tin pans, as if getting ready for a jolly breakfast.

As that was encroaching on his private preserves, Perk hastened to bob up and assure the others he would soon be on deck, prepared to make a mess of his savory "flapjacks," as he had solemnly promised to do the very first morning in camp.

Soon every one was busily engaged, for there was bound to be "heaps" of work laid out for that wonderful day. Amos was examining the dilapidated roof of the cabin and settling just how

they should go about rendering it waterproof; Wee Willie beat some batter in a tin vessel, under the eye of the self-constituted master of ceremonies (for Perk had actually donned a snow-white peakless cap, fashioned after a regular *chef's* headgear, doubtless meaning to have no dispute regarding his recognized rights to the exalted title); while Elmer had taken to looking around outside, especially over in the quarter of the leaning birch tree.

He came over to the fire a little later, and Wee Willie at once detected indications in his face that made him suspicious.

“You’ve discovered something new, Elmer, now don’t deny it!” he immediately asserted.

“What is it?” hastily demanded Perk.

“Well,” said Elmer, quietly, “it’s just this; whoever that man may be, he came back again during the night!”

This information caused all of the others to show fresh interest. Perk was just in the act of tossing aloft his first flapjack, and in his nervousness he actually missed connections, so that the delectable morsel ignominiously fell into the ashes, and was thus lost.

“It wasn’t up to the mark, anyhow,” the nervous cook hastened to say in apology; “first off

the pan shouldn't be eaten, I always claim. But you *did* give me a jolt, Elmer, when you said that."

"How do you know?" questioned Wee Willie; "run across the sign, did you?"

"He walked completely around the cabin twice," stated the other. "From the indications I'd say he must have been a heap surprised to discover that it had occupants; for I take it, he could hear some of us breathing pretty hard."

"Huh! needn't all look right at *me*," Wee Willie hastened to snap, as he colored up amidst his freckles. "I made out to lie on my side the whole live-long night, I'd take my affidavit on that. I admit that once in a while I do snore; but that's when I roll over on my back, and have been gorging at supper on such things as mince pie and other heavy stuff. Go on, Elmer!"

"I know what you are thinking," Elmer continued; "how could I decide that the man didn't make those marks before we came? I'll tell you what proof I have right now. In the first place there isn't much dew in the tracks, which I reckon would indicate that the footprints were made shortly before dawn. Am I right there, Wee Willie? You're well up in woodcraft, and ought to be able to say."

“Sounds good to me,” grunted the other, wagging his head violently in the affirmative, while a pleased expression on his thin face told how much he felt complimented by having Elmer defer in this fashion to his judgment.

“Well, I had another good proof,” Elmer went on to say, with one of his reassuring smiles. “Where the tracks crossed the marks left by Collins and his pal they overlapped; that is, this footprint broke into the ones made by the two guards from the asylum!”

“Splendid work, Elmer!” cried Perk, this time succeeding brilliantly in tossing up his second flapjack, which alighted successfully in the pan, with the browned side up. “Guess he did come prowling around then, and like as not tried the door more’n once. Say, I’m real glad I fastened it as well as I did.”

“What do you suppose he wanted?” queried Amos, looking even more serious than was his habit.

“Not being a mind reader,” Elmer told him, “I couldn’t say; but to make a stab at it I’d guess he hoped we’d gone along, and he could have his old cabin to himself again.”

“Well, it’ll always be a big mystery who and what this chap can be,” Wee Willie concluded.

“I only hope now he knows we’re stopping here he’ll take the hint, and keep off the grass. It’ll go rough with any hobo *we* catch bothering our traps, let me tell you. Here, put that one on this warm plate I’ve got on this flat stone alongside the fire, Perk. It makes a beginning, and we can soon be starting in to feed.”

“Somebody open that bottle of maple syrup,” observed the bustling cook a little later on, as another “cart-wheel” cake went turning over in the air, to be caught dextrously again in the pan. “And when I get a third one ready you’d better start in eating while they’re fresh and hot. The coffee’s done; and of course I don’t mean to commence until somebody can spell me here.”

In good time they were doing full justice to Perk’s famous flapjacks; which each and every camper solemnly declared when passing up his pie-tin for more were really unequaled by anything served at the breakfast table at home.

Of course Wee Willie presently insisted on taking Perk’s place, so that the *chef* might take the edge off his own appetite; until finally all of them declared they could not swallow another bite, and with three cakes left over.

“For munching on between meals, if any one wants a snack,” Perk explained, as he put them

aside. "Nothing to be wasted in this camp—that is, except perhaps the first tryout in a batch."

Then they commenced to do things, each one having jotted down certain tasks that should be attended to without delay.

Elmer and Wee Willie took upon their shoulders the mending of the cabin roof; patching up sundry apertures between the logs of the walls, where the dried mud had long since fallen away through the action of time and weather combined; and also renewing the broken hinge on the cumbersome door.

Perk insisted on cleaning up the breakfast things; somehow he loved to serve in the capacity of cook, and his mates seemed perfectly willing to have it so, strange to say.

As for Amos, already he had his precious camera out, and announced his intention of searching the immediate neighborhood, in hopes of securing some unusual picture.

"I'd like above all things to find a late partridge on her nest," he was explaining ere he sauntered forth. "I've always wanted to get a picture of the bird on her eggs, or strutting around with her chicks; but I'm afraid it's a heap too late in the season for such a thing to happen."

“As a rule the early brood is pretty well grown by now,” commented Elmer; “still, I remember finding a nest with eggs in it as late as this, and you might be just lucky enough. Wish you success, Amos; and if I can help you in any way let me know.”

“Perhaps you may when I get a chance to set a camera trap at night, so some cunning 'coon, or frisky mink, will take his own picture. That's my ambition, you know, Elmer, though I'm not building my hopes too high, not wanting to be disappointed.”

“I wouldn't stray too far away, if I were you, Amos,” hinted Wee Willie.

“Oh! I'm a pretty fair woodsman,” insisted the other, “and I reckon now the chances of my getting lost are small. But I'll just wander around the Bend here, and sort of get my bearings, as well as keep one eye out for anything that appeals to me.”

“And keep the other on the watch for signs of that tramp, or lunatic, Amos,” Perk insisted on warning him solicitously.

So Amos walked away, carrying his camera along with him. Elmer looked after him with an expression akin to concern on his young face, which shrewd Wee Willie was quick to notice.

“Something seems to be bothering him, don’t you think, Elmer?” the latter asked in a low tone so that Perk might not hear what he said.

“Y-es, I’ve thought so myself lately,” admitted Elmer, slowly; “though you remember, Amos has always been a sobersides of a chap ever since we came to know him. There’s a sort of family trouble weighing down on him, I reckon; something that is no one else’s business. I’d like to comfort him if only I knew how to go about it; but I don’t want to kick in where outsiders have no right. But let’s change the subject, Wee Willie; I dislike talking about any of my chums.”

They worked industriously for an hour and more, and under their clever tactics the roof began to show decided signs of improvement. Indeed, already one-half of its surface had been rendered impervious to water, after the boys had succeeded in thatching it with bark stripped from certain trees, and overlapping like the shingles on an ordinary house.

“By the time we get through we needn’t be afraid of the heaviest kind of a rainfall,” said Elmer, confidently; “unless it’s accompanied by a fierce wind, such as might strip all this off in a jiffy.”

“Where’s Perk gone?” asked Wee Willie; “I

thought I heard him saying something just then, but it sounded as if he was off somewhere.”

“I saw him prowling around in the brush yonder ten minutes ago,” Elmer informed him. “Like as not he’s just bent on seeing if there’s a good spot for fishing at the Bend here; because, you know Perk dearly loves to pull in the frisky black bass, or the striped perch, as well as eat the same.”

“Listen! wasn’t that him speaking again?” hissed Wee Willie, stopping his task of fastening a strip of pliable bark with small round tins, through each of which a nail could be driven, such as are used to secure tarred paper to the roofs of chicken coops and other small outbuildings.

“No, you don’t, not this time, you nasty thing!” Perk was heard saying half in disgust, and with a tinge of consternation in his tones. “Curl up again, and shake your old locust rattle as much as you please, who cares?”

“Perk!” shouted Elmer excitedly, recognizing a certain dreadful sound that now floated to his ears, “back away! Don’t fool with a rattlesnake, you silly! Back water, and in a hurry!”

CHAPTER VI

THE EVENTS OF A DAY

BOTH boys leaped to the ground without waiting to agree on any particular program. They had recognized the peculiar buzz of an angry rattlesnake, so like the shrill sound made by a locust on a hot August day, and once heard never afterwards forgotten.

The thought of their chum taking any chances with such a dangerous viper thrilled them, and also gave them a chill. Elmer snatched up the first stick he could see, in which he was speedily imitated by the other. Then they started on the run, heading directly for the spot whence that furious whirring sound sprang.

As they went thus they heard another sort of disturbance, as though some object might be swishing through the bushes, or else beating the ground. Then again came the voice of Perk, uttering low warwhoops, as though furiously engaged, while the rattle gradually became uncertain, and finally ceased to sound.

“Take that with my compliments, and here’s another of the same sort! Huh! lunge at a fellow

who didn't mean to bother you at all, will you? Guess I've done for *your* hash all right, thanks to this bully pole. Hello! fellows, just come up in time to see me clip him the last stunner. He's settled, don't you think?"

Elmer breathed easier when he saw that bulky Perk had snatched up a convenient pole, and with this had proceeded to break the back-bone of the angry snake. It was even then squirming on the ground, and judging from its length must be an old campaigner, being fully three feet, which could be considered fair proportions for a Northern specimen.

"He didn't get to you, I hope, Perk?" was the first question Elmer asked, at which the other grinned, and shook his head vigorously in the negative.

"Glad to say he didn't, Elmer; but shucks! if he could only have flung himself his full length, instead of only half, I believe he'd have struck me. But I did for him, let me tell you, that's right. Six rattles, and a prime button to wind up with, to show for my encounter! Whew!"

"But didn't you hear his warning rattle?" demanded Wee Willie; "I never knew a case where one of his stripe didn't shake his can like thunder

before you almost stepped on him. They're the only honorable snake there is."

Perk colored up, and then candidly admitted his shortcoming.

"Why, er, you see, I just must have thought it was only a locust buzzing away like all get-out," he confessed, in some confusion. "Then all at once he launched himself out at me, to fall short; but like a flash he was coiled again, and starting in to make that queer buzzing sound once more. Oh! yes, I did get a shock, and felt as cold as ice for a few seconds; then my dander seemed to rise, and I just looked around for a pole, which luckily enough happened to be handy. It knocked him silly, you can see."

"We'll take no chances with such a slick neighbor," said Wee Willie, who happened to be carrying the camp hatchet in his left hand; with which he now proceeded to decapitate the squirming snake. "There, be careful not to step on his head, Perk; I've heard of a case where a man died by doing that, the sharp fangs running into his foot through his soft moccasin."

Perk was contented to obtain possession of the rattle as a memento of his late exciting encounter. He showed some concern over the matter.

“I certainly hope there isn’t a nest of these chaps hanging around Log Cabin Bend,” he remarked, solicitously. “What with watching for snakes, and escaped lunatics, I can see where we’re bound to be on the alert every minute of our stay up here.”

“So far as that goes, it always pays to keep your eyes open when afoot in the Tall Timber,” Elmer warned him. “You never know what you may run up against any minute; and preparedness is the right bower of every woodsman worthy of the name. Already we’ve run across three instances of this—first there was that crouching cat Amos frightened off with his flashlight; then came the mysterious party who slipped away from the cabin at our approach; and now this venomous snake that was lying coiled in your path, and on which you might have trod unawares only for his generous warning.”

“This ought to be a good lesson to me, Elmer,” humbly admitted the contrite Perk. “I realize that I’m a whole lot short on woods lore, and all those things some of my fine pards know so much about; but I mean to soak in a wheen of the same while we’re up here in camp. Yes, every time I

shake this rattle it'll remind me how wofully lacking I am in scoutcraft, and everything connected with life in the woods."

"Everything perhaps except the splendid art of cookery, Perk," remarked the cunning Wee Willie, adroitly feeding the ambition of the other to shine as an artist along such lines; "there you've got the bunch of us left at the post."

"Yes," remarked the other, with a puff of unconscious pride, while his eyes fairly sparkled with pleasure at receiving such a compliment, "I suppose a fellow can't be up head in everything; where one excels, another fails to hit the mark. And perhaps it's just as well that I have a knack for the noble culinary art."

Perk went back to camp with the others, as though for the time being his desire to look around had received a decided setback.

"I'll come out and put the ugly thing underground later on," he said; "for such trash ought to be buried deep, so as to keep the air around the camp sweet and pure. I burned some insect powder inside the cabin, you may have noticed, just to get rid of that stale odor we took to come from rank tobacco. It's a disinfectant in the bargain."

“That’s right, Perk,” assented Wee Willie, promptly; “anyway, it almost disinfected me when I poked my head indoors a while back, to see if there might be any cavity we’d overlooked. Made the tears come, too, so that Elmer he asked me, when I got back on the roof, if I’d had any bad news from home. But then I left the door wide open, so it’ll gradually pass away, let’s hope.”

The two menders of leaky roofs were soon at their old job, while Perk readily found something else to occupy his time and attention. He had pounded nails galore in the wall near the cavity which was used as a fireplace, and on these he hung such cooking utensils as they had fetched along with them, consisting of a large sized coffee-pot; a generous frying pan; some kettles in which grits or rice or oatmeal might be cooked; likewise a little teapot, for Perk was a regular old maid when it came to the question of drinking a decoction of the fragrant herb at lunch or supper, preferring it to Java at any time.

Along about half-past-ten by Elmer’s little nickel watch who should come in but Amos, with a look of eager expectation on his face.

"Guess you struck oil somewhere, didn't you, brother?" asked Wee Willie, as if able rightly to interpret this expression of anticipated triumph.

"Would you believe it," crowed Amos, "I had the great good luck to scare a bird out of the thicket where the berries are growing that partridges like to feed on early in the Fall; and on investigating there was a nest, with some eggs in it, and warm at that? Of course it's a silly bird that hopes to fetch up a flock of nestlings hatched out so near frost time, but it was pie to me!"

"What did you do?" demanded Perk, looking deeply interested.

"Well, I fixed my camera so it focussed on the nest, with the proper effect of light," explained Amos. "Then I crept away to some little distance, keeping in tabs with it all, so I'd know when to pull the string that would free the trigger of the camera, and expose the plate in a jiffy."

"And did it work; was the old bird so little alarmed that she'd come back to her nest before the eggs got chilled?" continued Perk.

"Just what she did," assented the eager photographer, "and as soon as I saw everything was O. K. I did the business. Knew just when the trigger

sprang, too, for I noticed her give a little jump at the click. Then she flew off again as I stepped up to recover my camera that lay on the ground. I certainly do hope I've struck a decent picture; but if not I'll just keep on trying till I do."

"That's the right spirit, Amos," chuckled Elmer. "Just keep it up and you're bound to get there sooner or later."

Then the newcomer had to be told about Perk's thrilling adventure, as well as shown the rattle of the dead snake by the proud victor in the battle royal. The reader may rest assured that by the time all three boys had given their separate version of the encounter, Amos was fully posted regarding every detail possible.

"You came out of it in prime shape, Perk," he said, heartily; "but luck was on your side. If you'd happened to be a foot closer, there might have been a far different story to tell; and a heap anxious lot of fellows up here at Old Cabin Bend. I've known of chaps who were struck by a rattler, and died in spite of being dosed with whisky, and such things, under the idea that one poison can counteract another. For myself I like to give snakes a wide berth. I'll step out of the trail every time to let one hold possession."

“It’s really the safest plan,” assented Elmer.

“But that isn’t just all my news, boys,” continued the ardent photographer. “Down under the river bank I found a heap of little tracks, mink footprints for a certainty, showing that one old chap roams around there, anyway. And tonight, Elmer, I’d like to have you help me set my camera trap, hoping to coax Mr. Mink to sit for his own picture.”

“You can count on me in anything you ask, Amos,” he was told most heartily as the roofers again got busy with their pounding.

After they had partaken of a light lunch, meaning to have the big meal of the day come at evening, when their tasks would all be finished, they lay around resting and dozing, for it had become quite warm.

Perk, however, showed signs of continued nervousness. Perhaps he had received a greater shock during his encounter with the rattler than he cared to admit; then again the suspicion that an escaped lunatic was hovering around, and trying to spy upon them, was in itself quite enough to make him uneasy.

He got up, and threw himself down again as many as half a dozen times, considerably to the

amusement of Wee Willie, who was slyly watching him. Finally Perk found a seat on a convenient log, and sat there, staring away toward a little uplift of land that might be called a forest knoll, where the trees stood up far above the balance of the timber.

Wee Willie, watching, saw the fat chum suddenly start, and bending forward stare very hard at something. His features were working, too, as though Perk might be laboring under a fresh spasm of excitement.

“Well, I just expected it’d happen!” Wee Willie heard him mutter.

“What happened, Perk?” demanded the other, lifting his head.

“Why, there he is right now, perched in that beechnut tree up on the knoll yonder. You can see the dark mass move if you look sharp! Of course he’s spying on the camp; and I bet you he’s got it all fixed to visit us this very night!”

CHAPTER VII

THE CLIMBER OF THE BEECH TREE

“GINGER! there *is* something big and black up in that tree, as sure as you live!” exclaimed Wee Willie, excitedly.

Both Elmer and Amos also stared. Apparently they found it necessary to agree with what the tall chum had just said. It looked as though humble Perk had scored again; somehow he seemed to be connected with almost everything that had happened to them thus far; when as a usual thing such events took delight in passing him by.

“There, didn’t you see him move?” he added, with a tinge of triumph in his voice. “Just think of his nerve, climbing that tree to watch what we do. If he’d been a signal-sender in the old Boy Scout days at Chester, before the troop busted up, he couldn’t have picked out a better location. I bet you he’s watching us right now. What ought we do about it, Elmer?”

Considerably to the astonishment of the

speaker, Elmer was heard to give an unmistakable chuckle, as though something amused him.

“Well,” he went on to say, “we might walk out there and tell that party we objected to his company; but the chances are he’d sniff at us, and amble away; for you see it’s only *a bear!*”

“A bear!” gasped Perk, turning again to fasten his eyes on the mysterious object perched high in the big beech tree.

“Yes, a black bear, and I reckon a half-grown cub at that, else he wouldn’t be so fresh as to climb a tree so near our camp,” the other continued; while Wee Willie nodded his head in affirmation, and hastened to corroborate the statement by saying:

“No doubt about it, Perk, your hobo is a four-legged tramp, all right. I c’n make him out plainly, now he’s moved a bit; though at first I began to think it might be a man sitting astride a limb.”

“But what’s a bear doing up there, I’d like to know?” Perk objected, hardly liking to give up his side of the case so easily.

“Why, from away back bears have been in the habit of climbing trees whenever they felt like it,” the tall boy told him; “and there’s nothing in the

Constitution of the United States that's going to make 'em change their habits either—that is, black bears. It's a different thing with grizzlies out in the Rocky Mountain country, I understand; they keep to the ground."

Perk sighed with real relief as he hurriedly remarked, and quite cheerfully at that:

"Well, I'm glad to know I was mistaken. It gave me a bad feeling to think that ugly tramp was spying on us. Yes, now the thing shifts again, and sure enough I can make him out plainly. It's a real live bear—not a monster, but pretty hefty for all that."

Amos darted into the cabin.

"Now what's he after, I want to know?" Perk quickly asked.

"Just as like as not, that camera of his," Elmer explained. "Amos is crazy on the subject of photography, and his first thought always is, 'Will it make a striking picture?' I reckon he thinks he might be able to creep up close enough to snap that chap off, up in the beechnut tree."

Sure enough out came Amos on the run, and gripping his ready camera.

"I'd like to get him the worst kind, fellows!" he told them. "Some of the boys at home will

laugh at us when we tell them we actually saw a black bear up in a tree. I'd make them feel like thirty cents if I could hold up a photo of the happening, taken at closer quarters than this."

"We'll all go along, Amos," suggested Elmer.

Possibly he fancied that the others might find their presence useful in some way or other. It might be wise, Elmer even suspected, since the rash photographer, in his burning desire to get a close view, might run foul of the claws of Bruin, and need material assistance.

"Glad to have you," agreed Amos, a faint smile coming on his usually wan face; "but let's hurry, please, because the bear might take a notion to come down, and then my chance would be gone."

"Follow me," Elmer told him. "We've just got to swing around a bit so as to come up to leeward, for he'd be apt to scent us if we kept straight on down the wind."

"Good boy, Elmer, you're right!" commended Wee Willie.

"And now no talking except in whispers, with as little of that as possible. We don't want to have our walk for nothing, I imagine."

With these words Elmer led off, the others trooping after him, Amos coming next, then the

tall chum, and fat Perk bringing up the rear, as was ordinarily his custom.

They soon found themselves deep in the woods, with all sight of the big beechnut tree on the knoll lost to them. But trust Elmer for having fixed the location indelibly in his mind. Every step they took was fetching them just that much closer to their goal; and while Wee Willie also kept tabs on their progress, not once did he find occasion to enter the slightest protest concerning the leadership of Elmer.

After about ten minutes of this sort of thing, the one in the van stopped, and held up his hand. They seemed to be at the foot of the knoll, judging from the lay of the land. Elmer parted some bushes that hemmed them in, and, looking up, the others saw the very beech tree toward which they had started.

There could no longer be the least doubt concerning the nature of that dark object, for it was a young black bear. Whatever had tempted him to climb the tree they could only guess; for at the time they discovered him afresh the clumsy little animal was thrusting out his muzzle, and seemed to be sniffing the air suspiciously.

“He’s got a whiff of human presence near by, somehow or other,” whispered Elmer; “do you



His method of descending the tree was exceedingly clumsy.

think you could snap him off from here, Amos?"

"To be sure I can," came the ready response, as the camera owner shifted his position; and a few seconds later a sharp click announced that he had done the work.

"He heard even that little sound," announced Wee Willie, in a low tone, "because I saw him give a start. Hurry and duplicate, Amos, for the rascal means to come down."

Sure enough the bear seemed to have decided to change his location, as if growing uneasy after getting that suspicious waft of a scent his instinct told him was hostile to his species.

His method of descending the tree was exceedingly clumsy when compared with the clever actions of a gray squirrel while skimming the smooth trunk with ease. Indeed, the bear acted very much like a boy would have done, coming down stern first, and being very careful not to let go above until sure of his footing on a limb below.

Amos kept busy snapping him off in various postures. He evidently meant to make sure of having some extra fine pictures to show.

Perk meanwhile began to grow a little uneasy, and even plucked at the sleeve of Elmer as he managed to say excitedly:

“What if he’d feel mad and start to tackle the bunch? We haven’t got even a club or a hatchet along, come to think of it. Are black bears inclined to be vicious, Elmer; will they bite and scratch like a wildcat?”

“Don’t worry about that, Perk,” chuckled the other. “They are most harmless animals as a rule, hardly more dangerous than so many hogs in the pasture. Besides, this is only a youngster; chances are he’ll run for all that’s out as soon as he hits solid ground.”

“I’ll give a whoop, and help scare him off then,” suggested Perk, picking up his courage again.

“Just as you please; and Amos here can snap him off while on the gallop!” Elmer concluded.

The bear was now almost at the foot of the tree. Amos stepped out so as to command a better position for covering the spot. He had just one more exposure left, when the half dozen would be complete; and he wanted to make sure this last would not be wasted.

Perk was waiting, getting redder than ever in the face with suspended breath and no sooner did he discover that the young bear had reached the ground than he let out a yell that might easily have shamed a Comanche Indian. Of course, this

started the timid beast off at a wild pace, while Amos clicked his camera to prove that he had taken advantage of the opportunity.

The last they heard of Bruin was the clatter amidst the brushes and thickets as he scrambled madly through every obstacle to his progress, only wild to get away from that point of danger.

Elmer and Wee Willie exchanged looks, and laughed good and hard.

“Never will stop short of three miles, believe me!” asserted the latter. “I didn’t believe you had it in you to let out such a fiendish whoop, Perk. But it paid us for coming over here, for now we can say with truth we had an adventure with a wild bear, and that Amos here had to ‘shoot’ six times before the fight was finished.”

Amos looked decidedly pleased.

“I’ll have to call this my bear roll of film,” he suggested, patting his camera affectionately, after the manner of those who are seized with the photographic craze. “And out of the lot there must be several half-way decent pictures. I never believed I’d get such a great chance as this.”

“Say, things are happening like hot cakes, seems to me,” Perk remarked, as once more they turned their faces in the direction of the camp. “Why, we hardly get through with one event be-

fore another comes crowding along right at its heels. We've done considerable camping this summer, ever since we started the Camp Fire Boys' Club, but nothing like this ever came along the pike."

"Suits me all right!" Wee Willie declared, grinning. "I like excitement, and just sitting around, loafing, never was my style of enjoying myself. Why, I'm even hoping we'll see something of this chap who was hanging out in the cabin when we came along and squatted here."

"Oh, wouldn't it be a tough joke on us now if, when we got back, we found he'd been there in our absence, and helped himself to lots of our stuff?"

Perk, as he spoke, looked as though this might not be a groundless fear after all, but Elmer only laughed at him.

"I'm going back another way, you notice, Perk. Every now and then we can get glimpses of the cabin, with our fire burning in front, and so far I've seen no sign of any intruder. Don't worry about it. In three minutes we'll be home again."

His prophecy came true, and Perk was relieved to discover that nothing had mysteriously vanished during their brief absence from camp.

CHAPTER VIII

AMOS'S STRANGE ACTIONS

THE incident of the climbing black bear was closed around four that first afternoon in camp. Altogether it had been productive of considerable excitement, and amusement as well. The day, however, was fated to see still further singular happenings before closing.

Elmer was inside the cabin "fussing around," as he called it. He had cleaned out the shabby old fireplace, making a few badly needed repairs, so that the chimney might draw properly when they came to start a blaze there evenings, wishing to gather around, and chat or sing as the humor seized them.

Amos had wandered off again. He said it seemed to be a banner day with him so that he felt inclined to roam about and possibly make a few more discoveries that would be of value; which, of course, pertained to the camera stunt only—he had thoughts for nothing else apparently.

Perk and Wee Willie were discussing the menu for supper when Elmer came out of the cabin door, and approached them. He seemed to be holding

something in his hand, though neither of the other boys could quite make it out.

“Well,” Elmer commenced saying, as he came up, “I think I’ve discovered just why our tramp wanted to get back into the cabin again last night, going all around twice, looking for an opening which he didn’t find.”

“That sounds interesting,” observed Perk.

“Tell us about it, Elmer,” the tall chum added; “and what under the sun are you holding there in your hand?”

Elmer laughed softly.

“That’s the answer,” he hastened to say, and then held something up before their eyes.

“Gee! what a funny knife!” exclaimed Perk.

“Where’d you run across it, Elmer?” demanded Wee Willie.

“The blade is open, you see, just as I found it,” explained the other. “And it was sticking in a log close by the yawning fireplace. From the odor that hangs about the blade, I reckon Mr. Tramp must have used it to slice some plug tobacco, that black, tough kind, you know, for his old pipe, and then thinking to use it again a little later on, just stuck it into a log of the wall near his head.”

“Huh! our coming along sent him on the run into the bushes, and he clean forgot all about his precious old knife—is that what you mean, Elmer?”

“Just so, Wee Willie; and missing his knife later he started to come back to recover it. To such men a knife becomes as precious as—well, Amos’s camera is to him; or your postage-stamp album might be to you, Perk. Besides, you can see what an odd sort of a knife this one is.”

“I never saw one like it before,” Perk spoke up. “Why, besides the one big strong blade it’s got a fork, and a spoon attachment, too. Fact is, it could be used for a whole meal. Yes, and here’s even a corkscrew along the back. What a queer knife it is, to be sure! I don’t wonder the poor old hobo valued it.”

“Perhaps he’s carried it for years and years,” mused Wee Willie, “and it’s his most treasured possession. I wish he had it in his greasy pocket again.”

“But see here, boys,” Perk suggested, “how do we know but that it might have been there for ever so long—mebbe since the cabin was in use before that tragedy happened here, that I’ve heard the folks down Chester way mention?”

Elmer and the tall chum exchanged meaning glances. They had supposed that Perk knew nothing about that tragic event, and had agreed to "keep mum" about it while in camp at Log Cabin Bend, lest he feel uneasy.

"Oh! that's an easy thing to decide, Perk," the former assured him. "If you examine the blade you'll find it's clear of rust, though far from bright. Now that couldn't be the case if it had been exposed here for years to the damp air, such as would blow into the cabin with the door swung halfway open most of the time it's stood empty."

"I get you, Elmer; please excuse my dense ignorance," said Perk hurriedly. "Now I wonder whether he's going to keep on hanging out around here until he gets back his old knife?"

"We'll have to put out a sign, and invite the chap to step up to the captain's office and prove property," Wee Willie argued whimsically after his fashion. "No questions asked, and no reward expected for finding the lost trusty blade; only we'd like him to clear out, and leave us alone. I've seen a bunch of tramps, and a mussy lot they are, taken as a whole. I always try to get to windward of 'em when watching how they manage to cook a meal in tomato-cans and such."

"But we saw no sign of his having had a fire

in the cabin," Perk went on to remark, reflectively; "and there wasn't the first evidence of his having made a bed out of brush. How do you account for that, Elmer?"

"Oh! he may have arrived only an hour before we did, and was so tired he just lay down to smoke and rest," came the ready answer; for Elmer always seemed to have a faculty for meeting objections.

"What will you do with it?" continued Perk.

"I haven't decided," Elmer told him. "I may hit on a way to get it back into the possession of the owner without hunting him up. Leave that to me."

"There's Amos coming along," Wee Willie added; "somehow he seems to be looking a whole lot happier than this morning. It must have been his success at snapping off the bear in the beech-nut tree."

"Yes, that was what did it," Elmer agreed; though his brow clouded, for this unexplained mystery that seemed to be always hanging over his comrade, making him so unhappy, was beginning to worry him considerably; he wanted to be of service to Amos, yet could not muster up courage to break in upon the other's reserve, since it would seem so much like thrusting himself

into business that did not at all concern him.

Amos was actually smiling as he approached, and few of the Chester boys could truly say they had ever seen such a genuine look of delight on his sad face.

“What do you think?” he burst out, excitedly, “I managed to get a glimpse of Mr. Mink, the very first of his kind I ever had the luck to see alive! Oh! but he’s a slick article, let me tell you, with his beady little eyes, and soft furry hide. And I planned it all out just where we ought to set the camera-trap to-night, Elmer, so’s to coax him to pull the cord, and set the flashlight going.”

Elmer looked at him with affection. Somehow he had come to care a great deal for Amos, which in one way was rather strange; for to most of the fellows the newcomer in Chester had not appealed at all, owing to his being such a moody fellow. But as is usually the case with such serious persons, when his face did light up in a smile it was wonderfully “fetching.”

“I reckon we’ll manage to get a picture of his Highness, King Mink,” Elmer assured him; “when we’ve laid ourselves out to the limit. I know a few tricks along those lines, which are quite at your service, Amos. But see here, what a queer find I made in the old cabin.”

He held up the quaint pocket-knife as he said this, and the eyes of the other became instantly focussed on it. To the astonishment, almost consternation, of Elmer, he seemed to be immediately strongly affected by the sight of the late property of the roving tramp.

Perk and Wee Willie also stared to notice how the face of Amos, actually showing a dash of color when he first joined them, now suddenly became as pale as that of a ghost. His breath came and went in gasps, though apparently he was making desperate efforts to hold himself within bounds, doubtless realizing how his startled companions must be observing him.

“Where did you say you found it, Elmer?” he finally managed to say, in what might be termed half gasps, while he could be seen swallowing something that seemed to rise in his throat, and threaten to choke him, poor fellow.

“Why, in the cabin there,” explained the other, hesitatingly. “It was sticking in one of the logs forming the wall, between the little opening used as a window and the big fireplace. I think the hobo must have used it to cut up some hard plug tobacco, for it smells rank of the stuff; and then carelessly thrust the point into the log, before our coming frightened him away.”

“And, what do you think,” Perk now managed to add, “Elmer believes it was to recover this old knife that the old tramp came back and walked around the cabin twice last night, looking for a chance to get inside. Too bad, isn’t it, Amos?”

Amos, however, seemed to pay scant attention to what Perk was saying. His distended eyes were fastened on the article which still lay exposed in Elmer’s open palm.

“But—couldn’t it have been there a long time, don’t you think?” he now asked, as though clinging to a straw; “say as much as—six or seven years?”

“I’m dead sure it hasn’t,” he was told positively. “In the first place, other persons besides us have visited the old cabin here from time to time, and some one would surely have found it. Then again, look how smooth the steel of the discolored blade is; it must have rusted if it had been exposed to the weather for even a few months. Oh! no, Amos, whoever the tramp is, he surely put it where I found it, and this very night.”

“I—guess you’re right, Elmer,” fell in trembling tones from the lips of the other, still looking peaked and white. “W—would you mind my looking at it?”

“Certainly not,” said Elmer, at the same time thrusting the queer knife into the other’s hand, eagerly stretched out to receive it.

All of them could not help but notice how his hand trembled violently from some sort of emotion as the fingers closed about the haft of the knife. Evidently there was some element about the find of Elmer that affected Amos Codling. He turned the knife over, and stared hard at the buckhorn handle as though fairly fascinated, while the other three watched him with surprise bordering on amazement.

While the trio continued to stand there gaping, Amos hastily thrust the object back into Elmer’s hand. He almost acted as though shuddering at its touch, and anxious to get it out of his possession.

“Guess—I’ll go and lie down for a bit,” he managed to say in a fairly steady voice. “I’ve overdone it in tramping to-day, and feel worn out. Don’t bother about me, boys; I’ll—be all right soon.”

With these words he stalked hurriedly into the cabin.

CHAPTER IX

THE RIGHT KIND OF PALS

“WHY, whatever can be ailing Amos?” Perk said softly, immediately after the strange boy had vanished from view inside the cabin.

Elmer held up a warning finger.

“Whatever you say, speak in a whisper, boys,” he went on to remark.

“Gee whiz! but here’s another mystery looming up!” gasped Wee Willie. “Why, Elmer, he seemed to recognize that old knife, don’t you think?”

“It looked that way,” muttered the other, glancing toward the cabin with a world of commiseration in his eyes, “and whatever the memories may be it aroused, I’m afraid they couldn’t be happy ones.”

“Somebody he knew once owned such a knife, and he asked to see it so as to make certain,” pursued the wise Wee Willie, reflectively. “Yes, and I reckon he found the proof he was looking for, too. Let’s see the thing again, Elmer.”

“I know what he found, all right,” the other assured him. “Here, you can see that there are two letters roughly scratched on the buckhorn handle.”

“What are the letters?” insisted the tall chum, who when interested in a subject was a difficult one to make let go.

“No use trying to hide anything from you, Wee Willie,” Elmer replied. “They are not fashioned very elegantly, for the handle is rough, you see; but as near as I can make them out the letters are S. C.”

The elongated boy pursed his lips as if intending to whistle; but evidently thinking better of it failed to emit a single sound.

“And his name, it’s Codling, remember,” he whispered, with a quick look over in the quarter where the lone cabin stood under the big tree.”

“Yes, that looks significant for a fact,” agreed the deeply interested Perk, adding immediately afterwards, “Poor chap, I’m awful sorry for him, no matter what the cause of his trouble may be. He was looking quite happy, for him, as he told about that mink he discovered peeking out of its hole under the bank; but when he saw the knife, and heard what Elmer said, the smile froze on

.

his face, you might almost say. I wish I could help him some way."

"None of us can do a thing until he makes the first move," warned Elmer, with a determined shake of his head. "I've felt this coming for some time, and wished he'd make a confidant of me, but up to now he hasn't seen fit to do so."

"Oh! what is that?" asked Perk, in almost awed tones.

"I think it must be Amos sobbing, and trying to keep his head down in his blankets," admitted Elmer, himself almost choking with the great desire he felt to hasten in and try to comfort his friend. "But we must pretend we don't hear him. After a while he'll feel better, and join us again, for he's got a heap of what you might call grit, likewise pride, about him. Perhaps while we're up here he may see fit to tell us his trouble, and then we'll be able to offer to help him, if it's possible."

Perk turned his face away. The others, knowing his tender heart, could give a pretty good guess concerning what caused him to do so. Indeed, Wee Willie himself had to wink quite violently for some reason or other, and coughed as if he might be choking over something that

compelled him to drag out his big red bandanna handkerchief, and blow his nose strenuously.

“Of course,” pursued Elmer, who had been trying to figure things out most persistently, “it’s always possible that even if this is the same knife Amos once knew, some utter stranger may have left it here. Such things often pass through many hands in trade; or can even be stolen. Tramps have no sense of honor, most of us believe.”

“A tramp, greasy and ragged perhaps—ugh! no wonder Amos shuddered when he saw a picture of some one he once knew, perhaps even cared for, looking like that,” Wee Willie muttered, with a doleful shake of his head.

“Well, we must put it all out of our minds for the time being,” advised Elmer. “Let’s not add to his suffering by showing him we’re curious. As for the knife, I’ll replace it where I found it. I’ve got a little scheme beginning to take shape that may bring results; and at least get the thing back into the possession of the owner.”

Both Perk and the tall chum understood that this would be the wisest course for them to pursue. Elmer knew best how to manage things; they had always fared well whenever they trusted themselves to his guidance.

Presently the half choked sounds from within the cabin ceased. Apparently the boy had managed to get control over his feelings, whatever it may have been that caused such a tempestuous outbreak.

Perk and Wee Willie started preparing supper. The latter had tried fishing earlier in the afternoon, with more or less success; so that there was now a frying-pan filled with the results of his labor, and ready to go on the fire. Perk fairly beamed with pride as he feasted his eyes on the perch and bass, now nicely cleaned, and washed, and dusted with flour, before being placed in the hot grease that oozed from the salt pork in the pan.

Elmer found something to do that would keep him away from the cabin, for he thought it best not to disturb Amos just then. The other would in good time "get a grip" on himself, and be ready to face his chums again without displaying unusual emotion.

He came out while supper was cooking, and while he tried to smile as Perk called out and demanded to know if he recognized the origin of the delightful odor that was beginning to permeate all the surrounding atmosphere, it was hardly what might be called a success.

“It seems you did catch some fish after all, Perk,” he said in answer; “and I must say they do smell appetizing,” but that was the extent of his remarks, nor did either of the boys attempt to urge him to continue talking.

Perk was full of consideration for Amos; on his part possibly Wee Willie may not have been quite so solicitous; because curiosity was one of the tall chum’s weak points, so that he found himself wondering more and more what all this mystery, connected with the Codling boy, could signify.

Supper time found them gathering around the camp spread. A bountiful meal had been prepared, such as might make the eyes of the average hungry boy fairly glisten with satisfaction.

Amos ate very little. He seemed to have quite lost his usually keen appreciation for Perk’s cooking, a fact that worried the other considerably; for he did his best to press this thing and that on the other, though only to be greeted again with a gentle but positive refusal.

“It’s awfully kind of you to offer me the choice bits, Perk,” Amos would say, “and I’m sure everything does you great credit. I’d be only too glad to eat like Wee Willie here, if only I felt

hungry; but—well, somehow I don't seem to care much for anything to-night—I can't force myself, you know."

But he did keep on sitting there, and listening to the merry chatter and badinage of his three more boisterous chums, though frequently Elmer could see that his eyes had a far-away look about them, and the old peaked expression would struggle back to his face once more.

The boys had decided to sit around the fire that night, and sing some of their school songs; but with Amos in this strange humor of course they could not count on him to join in; and without his fine tenor the singing was apt to prove only mediocre, so they gave it up.

"Perhaps by to-morrow night things may have changed for the better, and we can try it out then," Elmer remarked, after Amos had withdrawn, under the plea that his head ached, and he thought he had better turn in early.

So, instead, the other three sat there and talked in low tones as time passed, with the night growing older. Perk often glanced quickly around at the somber woods. Elmer could easily interpret that questioning look, and knew that the other was wondering whether they might not have an-

other visit from the mysterious tramp whom they had alarmed by their coming, and yet who declined to leave the spot, while some of his personal property remained unrecovered.

There was no use trying to reassure Perk, for he happened to be more or less timid by nature. The door had been made additionally secure during the day just passed, so that no matter if the hobo did return he could not enter. As for his showing ill humor in any way, such as trying to set fire to the old cabin, Elmer would not allow such a thought to get a lodging in his mind.

Then came the moon peeping in upon them, nearly an hour later than its appearance the previous night, and looking somewhat battered along one edge, showing how it was in its decline.

“Time we’re off to our blankets,” suggested Elmer. “Here’s Perk almost dislocating his jaws every time he yawns. What’s the use of sitting up any longer when we’ve got fairly decent beds of hemlock browse under coverings waiting for us?”

In this he was supported by both his chums, so they all packed off into the cabin, leaving the fire fixed so that it would burn for some hours.

If the wind arose Elmer meant to step out and make sure no sparks were being blown into the underbrush; though at that summery time of year the chances of a conflagration might be reckoned next to *nil*.

So the door was closed and secured, Perk and the elongated chum seen safely into their blankets, and then Elmer himself took one last look around before following suit. Amos seemed to be sound asleep; at least his eyes were closed, and he was breathing easily. Elmer bent over and adjusted the other's blanket in a solicitous way. He did not know that Amos opened his eyes and looked after him affectionately as he turned away; or that there came a suspicious moisture trickling down the boy's cheek that was very like a tear.

Then darkness fell upon the scene, Elmer having shut off his little hand electric torch after he had tucked himself under his own blanket.

The night passed without any sort of alarm, for which Perk told himself he was very thankful as he again opened his eyes to find that it was morning, with his comrades—at least two of them—already outside, talking in low voices. Amos, however, still lay there, and seemed sound asleep. Perhaps he had passed a restless night, and only

forgot his trouble in the hours of early morning.

Perk soon emerged from the shack and joined the others, who were making preparations for breakfast. Elmer, after asking whether Amos seemed to still be asleep, drew closer to the others and followed up his question by saying:

“Well, my plan worked after all, boys. You remember I said I would try to get the knife back into the possession of the tramp. I reckon that’s where it is this morning!”

“However did you manage that, I want to know?” Perk demanded, plainly surprised by what Elmer had said so quietly.

“Yes, open up and tell us the secret, that’s a good fellow,” Wee Willie urged, as the two of them closed in upon Elmer.

CHAPTER X

AMOS DECIDES

APPARENTLY Elmer was ready to take the others into his confidence, for he immediately began to explain what he had done.

“You remember that I said I’d put the knife back about where I found it,” he told them; “which was close to that hole in the wall used for air as a sort of window, alongside the chimney.”

“Yes, I saw that you had stuck its pointed blade in the log; noticed that between yawns when I was getting ready to turn in,” admitted Perk.

“Well, it was gone this morning,” asserted the other, triumphantly.

“Yes,” objected Wee Willie instantly—they always said the tall chum would make a good lawyer, he was so ready with his objections—“but how do you know the tramp came back again and took it?”

“Who else would?” asked the puzzled Perk.

“Why, perhaps Amos got to thinking about it, not being able to sleep, and for some good reason chose to lay hold of the old thing,” explained Wee Willie blandly.

“Listen,” continued Elmer, with that quiet smile of his which the others knew so well spoke of assurance, “I considered that point myself, and fortunately there was a way open to prove my case. I’d smoothed out most of those tracks around the cabin, but when I came out to take a look, there they were again, showing the hobo had once more shown up.”

“Great work!” grunted the skeptical Wee Willie, now convinced beyond the shadow of a doubt.

“Better still,” added Elmer, intent on rubbing it in while about the job, “the marks led straight to that little window. You remember it’s got a sort of shutter secured with a hasp inside; though air can come in because of the slits between the slats. Now I purposely pried an end of one slat loose.”

“What for, Elmer?” queried the wondering but admiring Perk.

“So any one who felt like it could thrust an arm through the gap, and feel around inside,” Elmer told him.

“Jingo! what a bully scheme!” exclaimed Perk, grinning broadly; “for of course the knife was within reach from the opening. Now I can see why you feel so dead sure the persistent old

tramp got his knife at last. Say, it *does* pay to keep everlastingly at it, eh?"

"But why go to all that trouble just to please a Wandering George?" exploded Wee Willie. "For one, I'd have been glad to keep that queer contraption just as a curiosity, and so as to remember some of the things that have happened to us up here at Log Cabin Bend."

"Just what I didn't want to have happen," Elmer told him, sternly. "I knew that as long as that thing was around, every time it bobbed up poor Amos was bound to have a bad inning. Now it's gone, he may forget more or less about what it brought up in his mind."

"Gee! what a mixup we've struck, all around," muttered the tall chum, rubbing his pointed chin after a habit he had when reflecting; and then suddenly brightening up, he continued: "but we mustn't let such little things spoil our camping trip. Amos will get over it after a bit. We must all try to keep him interested in things—oh! what about that camera-trap business you two laid out to carry through last night?"

"Why to be sure," Perk chimed in, "there's that cunning Mr. Mink who lost a good supper last night just because you forgot. And I went and laid a nice fish-head aside for him."

“You’re wrong there, Perk,” Elmer assured him, quietly. “It wasn’t forgetfulness on my part; but Amos had gone to his blanket with a sick headache, and I just couldn’t find the heart to disturb him. The trap game will keep just as well for to-night. In fact, if it should happen to be cloudy all the better, because it is on black nights such things can be made a success. You see the camera must be left with the lens exposed, so that when the flashlight is fired the exposure will be complete.”

“Then how about daylight coming on, and finding it in that way, to spoil the exposed plate or film?” queried Perk.

“Oh! the photographer crank has to keep that in mind,” explained Elmer. “I understand experts in this line, who spend all their time and a heap of money in the bargain going to strange sections of the earth, just to get such pictures for their collection, have devised some sort of a clever arrangement whereby the pull at the cord by the wild animal releases the shutter of the camera, which closes again after a certain length of time, protecting the exposed film against any light that may come along, such as the rising sun.”

Just then the object of their conversation ap-

peared, coming from the cabin. Amos looked haggard and worn. Evidently he had passed a bad night, and his three chums felt greatly concerned over it.

Still, as they had agreed to act quite natural, they tried not to let him see what lay deep down in their hearts. Perk called out to him cheerily, to ask some natural question, and Wee Willie followed it up by saying:

“We were just asking Elmer about that mink you saw yesterday, Amos; and he told us you’d certainly lay for him to-night. I never got close to a shy mink, and hardly know what one looks like; so I sure hope you do strike off a good picture of his Royal Highness. I give him that title, you see, because his fine pelt has soared to what dealers call ‘abnormal prices’ in the fur market.”

“Yes,” Amos agreed, falling into Wee Willie’s pit, and showing something of interest, “all furs reached stiff prices during the World War. You see, so many who used to spend their winters trapping fur-bearing animals, in America, Russia, and other countries, were called to the colors, so the fur harvest dwindled terribly.”

“They say it’s an ill wind that blows nobody good,” chirped Perk; “and what was hard on

high-born ladies, and men who must have their fur-lined overcoats, was a big boon to the poor little hunted four-footed creatures who have to exercise all their intuitions so as to save their own coats."

"Why," Wee Willie broke in, "right close by up in Muskrat Swamp around the headwaters of our Beaverkill River they say the little beasts never were one-half so plenty as this summer. I warrant you there'll be many a dollar picked up there next winter, when some fellows I know start in trapping them."

"Muskrat Swamp," mused Perk, reflectively, "do you know I've never had even a peep into that queer place, and it lying not much over twenty miles away from Chester in the bargain. Some day I hope our crowd goes up there to camp, and prowl around. I'd give a heap to see what a real swamp looks like."

"Not a bad idea, Perk!" called out Elmer, who had heard what was being said, though up to then for reasons of his own he had not chosen to break into the conversation, "and we'll consider it later on. I'd like to explore that place myself, though I reckon we ought to have a boat of some kind to do the thing properly."

Perhaps all of them would have been consid-

erably astonished could they have lifted the curtain of the immediate future, and discovered how soon just such a glorious opportunity was fated to crop up, and beckon them.

Breakfast having been duly dispatched they set about the tasks of the day. The mess of fish had tasted so fine on the preceding night that Perk found little trouble about enlisting the services of Wee Willie in an expedition looking to a second installment. They had dug some angle worms, and soon departed for the nearby river.

“Don’t expect us back until near noon,” Perk called out, joyously. “Usually the fish stop biting along toward midday, but if we have a mess we’ll show up in time for lunch.”

“Don’t bother your head about that meal,” Elmer told him, “for it’s only right some one should spell you. We don’t believe in running a willing horse to death.”

“That’s white of you, Elmer,” Perk sent back over his shoulder, as he trotted along by the side of the striding Wee Willie, taking two steps to one for the long-legged chum.

Amos hung around the camp.

He pretended to be working with his camera, but Elmer noticed him casting nervous glances in his direction from time to time. From this

he wisely concluded that Amos had something on his mind, and was waiting until he could screw his courage up to the deciding point.

Knowing that it was the best thing to do Elmer simply went about his duties, whistling softly to himself, and paying no particular heed to Amos. If the other finally made up his mind to confide in him he felt sure no act on his part was likely to hasten things along.

Doubtless the fact of the others being off for the morning had something to do with the decision of Amos; since it gave him an opportunity to talk with his best chum undisturbed.

An hour and more had gone. Still Amos sat there on the log. His camera lay beside him, and the boy was bending forward, resting his head upon his hand, his elbow against an adjacent tree.

Somehow his dejected attitude stirred Elmer to the depths and caused him to change his mind. He felt that he must really make some move which the other could interpret as an expression of sympathy. As Elmer told himself: "If the mountain won't come to Mahomet, then Mahomet must go to the mountain," which would be the same thing in the end. He walked over to where Amos sat.

If the other heard his footfalls he gave no evi-

dence of the fact save perhaps a twitching of his free hand which lay on his knee. Elmer was approaching from the rear. He hardly knew what he meant to do except to come in personal contact with his chum. In times of trouble the touch of a friendly hand may mean everything to the one in mental distress, bringing fresh hope, and a renewal of the courage necessary to grapple with difficulties.

So, reaching the other, Elmer put his hand on his drooping shoulder.

“Amos, can I help you in any way, old fellow?”

The words were boylike, but sincere, as though they welled straight up from the heart of the speaker. They acted like a spur upon the quivering lad, who sprang to his feet wildly, and clutching Elmer's ready hand squeezed it convulsively as he exclaimed in a voice broken with emotion:

“Oh! Elmer I just *can't* stand it alone any longer! I didn't want to tell a living soul, but it's too much for me, yes, far too much! And I've made up my mind to explain what all this mystery means about that queer knife. Elmer, it once belonged to—*my own father*, who's been away for seven years, and all of us have believed him to be dead.”

CHAPTER XI

CLEARING SKIES

ELMER continued to hold the other's quivering hand firmly in his clasp.

“Try to control your feelings as much as you can, Amos, old boy,” he went on saying in his comforting fashion. “And don't tell me anything that you may regret. You can depend on it, though, that I'll respect your confidence, and not even mention it to Perk and Wee Willie, without your permission.”

“Oh! but I want them to know all about it too!” said Amos, looking up, and winking his eyes violently, “because it's only right. I hope, ever so much, that you won't despise me for s-s-sailing under f-f-false colors, that's all.”

“It's nothing you have done, I'm sure of that, Amos,” said the staunch chum, resolutely, “and that's all we count. You're not to be held responsible for the actions of some one else. Now, go on and tell me what you think best.”

He stepped over the log and sat down, drawing Amos alongside. Throwing an arm about the other's shoulder, Elmer waited to hear the sad

story, which in truth he could already more than half guess.

“Is it all about some trouble your father got himself into, Amos?” he asked, seeing that the other hardly knew just how to begin.

“Yes, yes, that’s it!” sighed Amos. “My father was never known to do mean things, but he certainly did slip up once, and everything came from that terrible mistake. Just like a good many others do who are tempted, he took money that didn’t belong to him, expecting to put it back when a certain deal was carried through; but something happened that turned the tide the wrong way, and he found himself—a defaulter!”

“Yes,” said Elmer, soothingly, “it is a sad thing for you to remember; since you must have cared a great deal for your father, judging from what you say, and how you still suffer.”

“I loved him, we all did, for up to that time he had always been good to us,” Amos confessed. “It was in hopes of bettering the condition of his family that tempted him to do that terrible thing, too, mother has said since, a thousand times.”

“He went away, you said, didn’t you?” continued Elmer, when the other paused as if lost in contemplation of the distant past.

“Yes, to avoid being arrested, and bringing

shame on his family," came the answer. "I shall never forget that awful day as long as I live, though I was pretty young then, hardly ten. It came like a hurricane out of a clear sky, father showing up, and looking almost crazy, telling mother all about it, and that he must go away to try to redeem himself.

"He left her all the money he had, and told her to take us children to an old aunt of hers, who had means. Father vowed that he would make no attempt to communicate with her, or ever come back, unless he could square himself with the firm whose confidence he had abused.

"From that terrible day to this we have never once heard from him. Mother fully believes he has long been dead. She often talks of him to me as we sit in the gloaming, and her thoughts go back to the happy days of her young married life. I have his gold watch, left for me, but which, of course, I shall not carry until I am grown up and in business.

"The old aunt died shortly after we came to live with her, and left her property to my mother, whom she dearly loved. It was enough to keep us fairly comfortable, though we have to count the dollars; and I may yet have to leave school and go to work, so as to help out.

“There, now you know everything, Elmer; do you think you still care to be chummy with the son of——”

“Stop right there, Amos!” commanded Elmer, gruffly, for he was in reality almost choking with emotion himself in sympathy with the poor chap at his side, who wanted so to cling to him, and yet determinedly pushed himself away, as if feeling not worthy to associate with fellows upon whose heads no such dark shadow rested. “If anything, you’re more my chum than ever. A pretty pal I’d be to hold back when you’re in need of sympathy. And both Perk and Wee Willie will say the same thing, you can bank on it.”

Amos drew a long lingering breath as of intense relief. He also seemed on the point of breaking down again, seeing which Elmer hastened to add:

“Now brace up, old fellow, and begin to believe things may not be *quite* so black as they seem. One thing you can depend on, that not a living soul in all Chester will ever know about your trouble through any of us. We’ll keep your secret, and not even drop a hint to our folks at home. You’re certain about that knife once being your father’s, are you Amos?”

“Oh! absolutely!” exclaimed the other; “I’d know it anywhere, for it used to be a great wonder to me. Besides, I saw his initials scratched on the handle, just as in the old days. Father had owned that knife a long time, and used to think a heap of it.”

Elmer remembering how the unknown tramp had hung around all this time just to recover the knife, could not help feeling that the present possessor must also have considerable affection for the thing, whoever he might turn out to be.

“But during seven years it could easily have fallen into other hands, you understand,” continued Elmer. “It might have been lost, or stolen, in fact, passed through a variety of adventures by now.”

“I think you mean to say that if ~~my~~ father died some one with him at the time would have taken possession of the knife,” remarked Amos, again drawing a long breath; “which is perfectly true. I am not saying that I believe the tramp to be my poor unfortunate dad; but it was the sight of the knife turning up in this queer way after all these years that unnerved me so.”

“What sort of a man was your father, Amos—I mean did he happen to be tall, or short; and was he athletic or otherwise?” continued Elmer,

evidently with some object in view; at least the other suspected as much, for he turned to look inquiringly into his face before answering.

“Why,” Amos went on presently, “you see, he never could play football or baseball when a boy because he had one leg a bit shorter than the other. This didn’t interfere with his walking at all; because I’ve tramped many miles alongside him, for we were always—quite—chummy.”

“Was it his left leg that was the shorter?” pursued Elmer.

“That isn’t just a guess, is it?” demanded the other; “you seem to know, Elmer! Tell me what it means, oh! please do!”

Elmer looked at him rather uncertainly. Then, as if making up his mind he had no business to hold back anything from a chum, he went on to explain.

“You know I pride myself somewhat on my woodcraft knowledge, Amos; and it was easy for me to discover that the unknown—er, party who has been hanging about our camp here, hoping to recover that knife, had a short left leg; for his right foot always showed much more plainly than the other.”

Amos groaned.

“Then it is he!” he muttered. “Poor dad, and

poor mother! Oh! what wouldn't I give, if I had never been tempted to come up here with you to Log Cabin Bend. Then perhaps I'd still be contented in believing that he had long ago ceased to suffer in body and mind."

"Will you tell your mother when you go back home, Amos?"

"Had I better, do you think?" he asked, almost desperately.

"You must settle that for yourself, Amos. Think it over before you decide one way or the other. Your first consideration should be the happiness of the mother you love so much. Will it do any good to share your secret with her; or must it reopen old wounds that time has partly healed?"

"That's it!" muttered Amos, shaking his head sadly. "I know how she will begin to lie awake nights again like she did before, and look so sorrowful, always watching down the road as if half hoping to see him come limping along, waving his hand to us, as he did every night when returning from the office. Yes, I mustn't be rash: I would cut my hand off sooner than do a thing to make my mother cry as she used to years ago."

Elmer began to see that possibly it might be up to him to try to get in touch with the tramp,

and learn just who and what he was. He could understand what a cruel shock it must be to Amos even to suspect that his father could reach the low level of a common wanderer on the face of the earth, a hobo!

“You meant it when you said you wanted Perk and Wee Willie to know about this matter, did you, Amos?” he asked presently.

“Yes, I insist on it,” said the other, hastily. “I’m tired of sailing under false colors. If my chums all know my sad story it must be up to them to decide whether they want to keep up their contact with me, or drop me. But you must tell them, Elmer; I couldn’t have the heart to go over it all again.”

“I promise you I will, now you’ve given me permission, Amos; and make your mind easy. I know both of our pards too well to doubt what they’ll surely do. They may not be able to say much, but their actions will speak louder than words.”

“You’re all the finest chums any one could ever have, and it’d nearly break my heart if you turned back on me. Do you know, I’ve had the queerest things flit through my mind while thinking it all over.”

“Such as what, Amos?”

“For one thing I would picture my father crouching in the bushes off yonder and staring hard at us while we sat around the campfire last night, yet not daring to join the circle. I even wondered, Elmer, whether he could recognize me, for I’ve changed a lot in these seven years, of course; and how he must have felt at not being able to make himself known, just because he thinks that old charge still hangs over his head.”

“But doesn’t it?” demanded Elmer, suddenly thrilled somehow.

“Why, of course not,” said Amos, simply. “When mother came into the property of her old aunt, one of the first things she did was to have an interview with the head of the firm my father used to be with. She found out the amount of his defalcation, and paid it. That was what cut down our allowance so, and made us scrimp sometimes; but my mother always gloried in clearing his name. Oh, if he is only alive, and could learn that, what might not happen?”

“Courage, Amos!” said Elmer, “you’ve boosted the game a heap in telling me that.”

CHAPTER XII

SETTING THE TRAP

ALREADY Amos was looking much better. The hope that Elmer dangled before his wondering eyes grew in proportion to his ability to grasp its possibilities.

If it turned out that his wandering father were really in the vicinity, surely some way could be found to get in touch with him, so that he might learn how the cloud on his name had been wiped out years ago, and that he might have come back to his dear ones, if only they had had any clue concerning his whereabouts.

The two boys sat there on the log for almost an hour, talking, and trying to form some plan whereby this could be effected. Elmer had found the best medicine in all the world for his chum's uplifting; Amos no longer looked as discouraged as before, and even laughed a little at something humorous the loyal companion related for this very purpose.

Elmer, too, was greatly relieved. Why, after all, the situation was a whole lot better than he had dared hope. He became possessed of an

overwhelming ambition to find the tramp, and bring him the joyous news. Already in imagination Amos was picturing the joy that would fill his mother's heart if the wanderer could only be brought back home again, after doing penance so long for his delinquency.

Afterwards Amos took to making little excursions through the neighboring timber on one excuse or another, though it was not difficult for Elmer to understand that he indulged in a wild hope a voice might call to him from out of some copse, and his father appear in sight, unable to resist the longing to meet his boy once more.

But no such happy event came to pass, though Amos continued his walks, so as to scour the neighborhood in every direction.

During one of his absences from camp Perk and Wee Willie came in, bearing quite a noble string of perch and bass and catfish, which they had succeeded in catching through persistent efforts.

Elmer took advantage of the opportunity while Amos was away to tell the two others the whole story as related to him.

Of course, they were both intensely interested, and frequently interrupted the narrative to express their sympathy for the comrade in distress,

as well as to vow that not a word of it all should pass their lips.

“But, say, it may not be so bad after all,” Wee Willie hastened to remark, when it had been told. “If the amount taken has been made good then there can be no charge against Mr. Codling, and he could walk down the street of the city where they used to live without being bothered anyway. But then, to be sure he doesn’t know about this, and still believes the Law is looking for him.”

“It cuts Amos to the quick to fancy his father as a common vagrant,” continued Elmer. “Never mention that part of it to him if you happen to be speaking about these things.”

“Huh!” mused Perk, pursing up his mouth thoughtfully, “I reckon the world has kept on treating Mr. Codling rough all these years. The prosperity he went off to find never came his way, and by degrees he’s given up all hope, as these hoboes nearly always do, trying to forget the past, so I’ve understood. Do you think he could be rounded up, Elmer?”

“I’m going to try to make it come out that way,” was the quick reply, “although I don’t know yet just what plan I’ll adopt. Once we got in touch with him it would be easy, I guess. He might try to hold out, ashamed to have the wrong wiped

out through his wife, and not by his own efforts; but he couldn't fight long against being towed into a safe harbor, after seven years of roving and up against hard times."

"I hear Amos whistling as he comes along," said Wee Willie just then; "and it's really the first time he's done such a thing since we started on this camping trip. Shows he must be feeling a heap better already."

"He is," said Elmer, as he broke away from the two who were cleaning their string of fish, with the intention of having some of them for the midday meal.

"Because," explained Perk, sagaciously, "fish ought to almost jump from the water into the frying-pan; you can't get them too fresh to please me. And, say, I do just love 'em to beat the band!"

During the balance of the day they found numerous things to claim their attention, as is always the case when fellows who know the game are in camp. For instance, Wee Willie claimed that he was tired of eating off the ground, and proposed making some sort of rude but serviceable table that would be much more homelike.

"And while you're doing that job," Amos told him, "perhaps Perk and myself could hatch up

some kind of seats to use when we have to stay indoors, and can't squat on these two logs."

This idea pleased Perk very much, for if there was one thing he liked, and felt bound to have whenever possible, it was solid comfort.

"I never did see the sense of making a martyr out of yourself all the time you happened to be away from home, and in the woods," he observed sagaciously when on the subject; "so some fellows might call me a sissy, or an old maid because I insist on fetching along certain things like my tooth brush, and a few more necessities."

"Huh! like this, for instance, I suppose?" chuckled Wee Willie, appearing at the door of the cabin just then, and holding up an object which caused Elmer to laugh outright, and even Amos to smile indulgently.

"Oh! That's my trousers' creaser and stretcher," blandly admitted Perk, with a grin; "but honest to goodness I never meant to fetch it along; and I don't see how ever it got among my traps unless my sister Sue did it; she's as full of mischief as an egg is of meat, and would think it a good joke on me to find what I'd gone and lugged all the way into the woods. Think of me creasing *this* horrible pair of pants, will you?"

So they acquitted honest Perk of any evil intention along the line of playing the dude when in camp. But of course Wee Willie would lose no opportunity to plague him about his "stretchers" while they were at Log Cabin Bend.

During the early afternoon Elmer disappeared.

He had told no one of his intention, and indeed they did not really miss him until he had been gone some time.

"Where do you think he's off to?" Perk asked the tall chum, for he had left Amos to complete a rude chair upon which they were working, and strolled over to where Wee Willie was putting the finishing touches on their dining-table, an exceedingly rustic affair, but which promised to be fairly serviceable.

"Oh! that's an easy one," replied the other, in a low tone, and with a cautious look toward Amos. "You remember he said he meant to try to locate the man with the queer knife, if he chanced to be still hanging around in this neighborhood."

"But why should he stay, now he's got back his property, eh, Wee Willie?" persisted the stout boy.

"Huh! that's harder to answer, I admit," he was told; "unless he did chance to recognize Amos

while we sat around by the blaze of the campfire, and has been unable to tear himself away. But I leave that to Elmer; if any one can unearth the tramp he will."

"He nearly always does succeed in anything he undertakes," assented Perk, with a charming display of blind confidence in the absent chum.

Elmer did not come back for nearly two hours, and even then he gave them no hint as to whether or not he had met with any sort of success in his scouring of the timber in search of the mysterious lurker. Perk was for asking him, but Wee Willie displayed his accustomed shrewdness when advising against such a course.

"If Elmer wants to share anything with us depend on it he will, Perk; and until he makes a move that way we'd better keep mum," was what he told the other; and Perk, easily influenced, must have thought it good enough advice to follow, for he made no effort to "pump" Elmer.

They had their supper, and some time later Elmer, turning to Amos, remarked:

"How about that camera-trap business, Amos; feel like sauntering over to the bank where you glimpsed that cunning old mink, and setting things up for getting a snapshot of the timid hermit?"

Amos jumped to his feet instantly, his eyes glistening.

“I certainly would like to, Elmer, thank you; and so I’ll hustle and get my outfit, camera, flashlight pan, and all the apparatus necessary. Perhaps I startled the old chap when I looked in on him; but by now he’s had plenty of time to get over his scare.”

“How about you, Perk?” continued the leader; “you saved one of those fish-heads as I asked you to, didn’t you?”

“Three of ’em, Elmer; you’ll find them dangling by a string from that limb of the hickory sapling yonder.”

“We’ll toss the others as far away from camp as we can,” continued Elmer; “else we may be bothered with an army of ’coons fighting each other while trying to locate the prize their scent tells them is around here.”

He and Amos started off, and were soon at the spot. A creek, it seemed, ran into the Beaver-kill at that point, and it was really under the bank of this the hermit mink lived in a hole that doubtless had many side passages.

Elmer examined the ground thoroughly, and then they decided just where it would be best

to place the camera trap. The pan and flashlight cartridge could lie flat on the ground just alongside, and the cord that upon being jerked would cause the firing of the flashlight ran out to a certain point that Amos said would be in exact focus.

All these preparations were carried out with as little noise as possible, the boys seldom communicating while at work save in whispers; for they did not wish to frighten the timid game, doubtless at the time deep down in his burrow under the rocks and earth of the creek bank.

Finally everything necessary had been carried out. Amos went over it all for the last time, and concluded that he could not better the arrangements in any possible manner.

Accordingly they left the spot, Amos with the avowed intention of being out at first peep of dawn so as to make sure the shutter of the camera was closed before sunlight could destroy the result of their clever trick.

CHAPTER XIII

THE AWAKENING OF PERK

BECAUSE Amos was feeling much more cheerful they sang some that night. Perhaps the great woods up at Log Cabin Bend had never before echoed with the rare melody of four boyish voices. The little four-footed furry denizens of the forest must surely have listened in sheer amazement to catch the unwonted sounds floating through the leafy aisles, and believed that their solitude was indeed a thing of the past.

It was mostly rollicking school songs, intermingled with some of the popular military airs of the war time that they favored. Elmer saw to it that in no case did they switch to anything that had a touch of sadness about it. He wanted Amos to forget his troubles as much as possible, not hug them to his heart.

Fortunately it proved to be a peaceful night, with no trace of coming storm, which was a good thing for the photographic experiment.

At peep of dawn, Elmer waked just in time to catch a glimpse of Amos stealing out of the

cabin, he having managed to get the door open without making much noise. Although Elmer raised his head he did not utter a sound to let the other know he had been observed; for he knew very well that Amos had his camera in mind, and was heading for the spot where it had been set ready for Mr. Mink.

On the return of the other bearing his apparatus Elmer was up and outside getting the fire started. It needed no question on his part to decide that some sort of success had come to the ardent photographer.

“He visited the trap, Elmer, for a fact!” Amos was saying, his face showing signs of considerable satisfaction. “The flashlight had burned; and then too the fish-head bait was gone. I think he managed to work it clear of the cord; but he deserved it, sure he did, the cunning little varmint. Oh! I’m fairly wild to see what I got out of it!”

“Hold your horses until we’ve had breakfast, Amos,” the other advised him. “Then you can have the cabin to work in, when you start developing. I wouldn’t be at all surprised to find you’d made a big hit.”

“I used to think once I cared a heap to wander

the fields with a gun, and if I could only fetch home some game in my bag, a rabbit, partridge, gray squirrel, or quail I felt might proud of my skill; but I can plainly see I'll never again find any happiness in killing. This sort of hunting with a camera has got it all beat to a frazzle."

"The beauty of it is," remarked Elmer, "that you can still be on friendly terms with the little animals of woods and swamp, and at the same time secure your greatest triumphs. If that picture turns out good, I reckon you'll take ten times as much pleasure showing it, than if you'd trapped the mink, and had taken his poor little pelt to sell for a few dollars."

"Oh! I'm sure of that, Elmer. And I can see that there are really unlimited possibilities about this wonderful game. Just think how proud a man might be if he had an album crowded with such pictures, which he had collected all over the world, showing animals and birds in their native haunts, yes, telling how they lived, and reared their young. I guess the disease has got a firm hold on me, and I'll never go back to hunting with a gun again."

Other boys than Amos Codling have discovered the same thing; and many an innocent little crea-

ture living in the haunts of the wilderness owes its continued existence to the lure and fascination to be found in hunting with a camera.

When Amos came out of the cabin, after being shut up there an hour or more, he was looking decidedly pleased.

“It turned out gilt-edged, Elmer!” he exclaimed, holding up something with an air of considerable pride. “And, believe me, this negative is so strong it’s bound to make a splendid print. You can see what looks like an expression of *surprise* on the mink’s phiz when that dazzling flash came. Yes, and he’s tugging at the string we tied the fish-head to, for all that’s out!”

Each of the others took a look, and decided that it was indeed a prize negative. Considering the fact that it had been secured under such strange conditions, the contrasts were remarkably clean cut.

Amos was much encouraged by his initial success. Already he was doubtless laying ambitious plans looking to further triumphs along the line of what he was pleased to style “auto-photography,” because each sitter must of necessity snap off his own picture.

Still, as the morning advanced Elmer could not

help noticing that now and then Amos would allow his gaze to wander to this or that point. Perhaps he may have been figuring out his next step in the campaign; but Elmer, noting the anxious expression once more upon the other's face, decided that Amos was thinking of his father.

Perk had developed a sudden interest in woods lore. Up to then this subject had never interested him to any extent; in fact, he had been more apt to display concern over a rabbit in the pot, than one bounding over its native heath.

He now learned that there was a world of deeply instructive things to be picked up in connection with all these smaller creatures. Once Elmer and Wee Willie, that afternoon, began to give up some of the knowledge they had acquired, Perk started a flow of questions that seemed capable, like the poet's brook, of "running on forever."

The boys were good-natured, and really felt disposed to encourage Perk in his pursuit of knowledge. It might be a turning point in the career of easy-going Perk. Curiosity, along these lines, once aroused awakens interest, and begets a desire to know more and more, until all ani-

mated nature takes on a new and lively character.

“Well, now,” for one thing Perk remarked, “I’ve seen a rabbit start running when I crossed a field, and then act queer, as if suddenly lame. Yes, I can remember chasing bunny, and nearly overtaking the little bunch with the cottontail; when all at once it’d spin away like lightning, leaving me out of breath, and feeling foolish. So that was all a sharp trick, was it, Elmer?”

“A very common one, played by mother partridges as well as rabbits,” he was assured. “It was done just to draw you away from that clump of grass, out of which the bunny jumped in the start. If you’d gone there you’d have found a nest of young rabbits too small to escape. The mother was ready to risk her own life in order to save her babies.”

Perk was deeply impressed.

“Why, I wouldn’t have hurt one of them for anything,” he insisted; “but then the old lady couldn’t know that, could she? To think of such devotion even in an humble bunny! Why, it would shame a good many human parents, that’s right. And you say partridges do something the same, eh?”

“A common trick,” Wee Willie hastened to re-

mark. "Many a time in the summer, or early in the fall before hunting time came, I've had a bird suddenly flutter out on the woods trail before me, and act as if she had a broken wing. I used to chase after her at first, until I got wise to her sly trick. She'd let me almost grab her, and then just flip on a little further, all the while luring me ahead; then all of a sudden she'd recover the use of that broken wing and go off with a buzz."

"And did you find young partridges where she came from?" pursued Perk, with round eyes, and partly open mouth, as though he had begun to experience a forerunner of the strange fascination that a knowledge of all these wonderful things has for the lover of the Open.

"Lots of times," Wee Willie promptly replied; "but I give you my word for it, I was never guilty of trying to knock over a single one of the frightened brood when they scattered like crazy little things. Later on, I even refused to bother 'em in the least; though when the season opened I would take my gun, and hunt as well as the next one."

"Gee! I wish I could sight something like that," Perk was saying. "Do you think there are partridges around this place, Wee Willie?"

"I've heard 'em drumming more'n a few times,

Perk; and Elmer here said he'd flushed several when roaming around."

"But would any mother bird be apt to have her brood so late in the summer, do you expect?" continued the other persistently; for when an idea did find lodgment in Perk's brain it stuck most stubbornly.

"I wouldn't be surprised, for they say this was a late season, on account of so much rain early in the summer, that drowned out lots of nests. We might be lucky enough to run across one of these self-sacrificing old mother birds while up here at Log Cabin Bend."

"Huh! hope I'm along if it does happen," grunted Perk. "I never dreamed that you could learn such queer and interesting things just by keeping your eyes and ears open when in the woods. After this I'm going to investigate for myself. Seems like I'd just begun to scrape the scales off my eyes; for, say, I must have been blind never to have paid any attention to these things before."

Elmer was delighted to hear Perk say this. He had himself tried more than a few times to get the other interested in those very things, but without success. Just what it was that had finally turned

the trick he could not say. Perhaps the hour had struck for Perk to wake up; then again the sight of Amos beaming with joy over the success of his night effort may have set the match to Perk's slumbering ambition. No matter what the cause, Elmer was vastly pleased at the result.

The boys were not idle by any means as the day passed on. They found numerous things to occupy their time and attention. Some of these tended to improve the conditions; little conveniences were arranged as conceived, which were calculated to lighten the burden of getting meals; or else render their sleeping accommodations more comfortable.

So the afternoon began to wane.

Wee Willie and Elmer had been observing a perceptible change that was coming over the weather. In fact the day had been unusually hot, even for late summertime, and after summing up various portentous facts the weather sharps came to the conclusion that before another dawn they were likely to have a chance to test the rainproof qualities of their newly patched cabin roof.

"Something brooding, that's certain," Wee Willie asserted, as he mopped his perspiring brow, having been chopping wood a short time

before, with the result that the perspiration was standing out in beads.

“Did Perk go fishing again?” asked Elmer; “I’ve missed him for some time now.”

“I don’t think so,” the other replied, “for there’s his jointed rod standing over against the cabin right now. I remember seeing him walk off; and come to think of it he went toward the east, and the river lies to the west here.”

They looked at each other, with a growing uneasiness.

“Ten to one,” asserted Wee Willie, “Perk’s gone off on a little tramp in hopes of starting a mother partridge whirring before him. You know what he is when he gets any sort of notion in his head.”

“But we ought to have warned him against doing that,” Elmer hurriedly said, “remembering how one of his besetting sins has always been to get lost!”

With the prospect of a storm ahead they saw reason to feel concerned over Perk’s continued absence.

CHAPTER XIV

A STIRRING NIGHT AHEAD

“I’M afraid we’re in for trouble about Perk, Elmer,” the tall chum observed, his freckled face set in a frown.

“Nothing serious, so far,” he was told, for Elmer did not believe in “conjuring up ghosts” as he termed Wee Willie’s habit of anticipating calamities that might never come to pass. “Plenty of time still for Perk to come in before we start getting supper; and besides the storm hasn’t shown a sign so far.”

“But we know how easy it always has been for Perk to lose his bearings in the woods,” persisted the other camper. “Many a time before now we’ve had to go out and locate him. Seems as if Perk never will learn how to take care of himself.”

“He’s just waking up,” remarked Elmer; “and may surprise some of us yet, once he gets started. Still, it wouldn’t do any harm to give an occasional shout. If he hasn’t got beyond earshot it might help him locate the camp again.”

“I second the motion; and here goes for a starter.”

With that Wee Willie lifted up his strong voice, and gave a shrill yell that could doubtless have carried a mile away. Amos came hurrying out of the cabin as if wondering what was going on. He seemed relieved to find his two chums standing there.

“Why, you did give me such a start!” he declared. “I even thought that lunatic might have hopped in, and tackled Wee Willie. What’s all the shouting for?”

“Perk’s wandered off again, and we thought he might stray away, so we’re meaning to take turns in letting out a bazoo whoop to guide him this way,” explained Wee Willie, with a grin. “If he was within a mile I reckon he heard that clarion call of mine, eh, Amos?”

“Yes, and it ought to tell him which way the cabin lies,” returned the other, confidently. “But we must keep it up, for Perk, even if he started right, would be apt to swing to the left, like most fellows do in the woods when they haven’t learned the trick of keeping a direct line.”

“Every three minutes by the watch one of us must shout,” decided Elmer.

This program was kept up for half an hour.

Several times they would fancy there was a more or less feeble response, so that the shouting was quickly resumed; but after straining their hearing to the utmost they finally felt compelled to admit that this must have been only a vivid imagination.

“I sure heard something answer that last yell,” Wee Willie affirmed, stubbornly; “but then it may only have been an owl up in some old dead tree-top; or a cawing crow some distance away.”

“How long ought we keep this thing up, Elmer?” inquired Amos.

“Not more than another half hour,” came the reply.

“And if nothing happens then?”

“We’ll have to start out and try to locate Perk,” he was told.

“I saw him leave camp, and he went that way,” with which Amos pointed to a certain quarter; at which Wee Willie nodded, and hastened to add:

“Yes, I was telling Elmer here I saw him walk away, and he went in the direction of the east, which wasn’t toward the river at all. I don’t know how it came I seemed to take it for granted Perk was going fishing; must have had something on my mind at the time, and didn’t notice that he hadn’t his rod along. What makes things worse is that storm!”

“Storm!” echoed Amos, staring around; “why, it’s as blue as indigo overhead right now; where’s your storm, Wee Willie?”

“We seem to feel one coming in our bones,” explained the other. “Sometimes, you know you can tell that one’s due by certain signs. And if you look sharp you’ll see clouds gathering over in the southwest; which is the quarter most of our big summer storms spring from.”

Amos did look, and then shook his head as if dismayed at the prospect.

“I’m sorry for Perk, that’s all,” he remarked.

“Oh there isn’t so much chance of anything serious overtaking him,” Elmer hastily assured him. “To be sure he’s likely to get well drenched, and perhaps the thunder and lightning, as well as falling trees around him, may make it unpleasant for Perk; but that’s really the extent of it. If he wanders far he’s apt to get out of the timber belt, and run on some farm-house where he could get shelter, food and ditto a bed.”

“Yes, no one could ever refuse *him* anything he asked for, what with that winning smile of his,” said Amos.

They continued shouting at more frequent intervals, until all of them began to get quite hoarse; but there was no perceptible result. The second

half hour thus began to draw toward a close.

“All useless, seems like!” admitted Wee Willie in disgust.

“Yes,” Elmer observed, “we’re wasting time doing this, when we’d have shown better judgment in starting out a while ago. Knowing Perk’s failing as we do, we ought to have made up our minds that sooner or later we’d have to go out after him.”

He had seen to it that the single lantern they carried with them to the woods was well filled with oil from the extra bottle.

“Who’s going along?” Wee Willie now asked.

“I thought at first two of us would be enough,” said Elmer, “but changed my mind, and so we’ll go in a bunch”; at which information Amos looked pleased, for he had feared they would figure him out of the game.

“I’ll fix my camera so it can’t possibly get wet, if the storm comes, and the old roof drips in spite of all our fixing,” he hurriedly called out, darting inside the cabin.

“Not afraid about leaving our things unguarded, are you?” asked Wee Willie. “It would be a joke on us if that lunatic happened around, and cleaned us out of everything.”

“We’ll have to take chances on that,” Elmer decided, “but I reckon there isn’t much danger. We can close the door, and wedge it fast, so that any one’d believe it was barred inside, and that some of us were at home.”

“You said it, Elmer,” chuckled the other, “takes you to think up clever little schemes right along. I suppose we can expect to get a good ducking before we’re through this job.”

“Oh! well, we’re not made of sugar or salt, Wee Willie; and we’d stand much more than that for Perk!”

“I should think we would!” quickly declared the tall chum, energetically, as though anxious to put himself on record. “Why, I’d go through fire and water for him, and think little of it. I’m only worrying for fear something might happen to Perk, something serious you know.”

“Yes, such as a tree falling on him in the storm,” Elmer added, “or his breaking a leg by tripping over a trailing vine as he ran headlong, trying to find some sort of shelter. But let’s hope nothing like that will happen.”

“I’ve put a cake of chocolate in my pocket, Elmer, in case we don’t get back to camp to-night, and feel hungry; you fellows had better do the same. Wonderful lot of nourishment in chocolate

you know. Think I'll get another, for Perk, when we find him."

"Now that's a good idea," agreed Elmer, "and I'll see that Amos follows suit."

"You didn't want him to stay alone here while we were gone, I noticed, Elmer. What was the big idea?"

"In the first place, three might be better in scouring the woods than two. Then again I was afraid Amos would feel it terribly if left all alone in a storm, and as nervous as he is just now, worrying over his father. He was pleased when he heard me say all of us were to go."

"Of course, we ought to try to follow up Perk's trail as long as it's light enough, eh, Elmer?"

"I expect to, and even afterwards by the help of our lantern, Wee Willie. If he's kept turning to the left, as I suppose will be the case, and we continued along due east, we'd soon be leaving him further and further away. As it is we can cover several miles before we're forced to quit, and a burst of shouts might reach him."

CHAPTER XV

CAUGHT IN THE STORM

So plain was the trail of the wanderer that they had no trouble in following it at quite a rapid pace. Indeed, Elmer calculated that they were proceeding even faster than Perk himself had gone along; for as a rule the stout chum was not prone to make speed except when circumstances demanded that he let himself out—in a baseball game; or it might be a sack race for a prize.

More than once did Elmer mentally take himself to task for not starting out much sooner. The afternoon was closing in, and it would not be a great while before night came on. Even another precious half hour of daylight might have proven of considerable value to them; but then Elmer knew it was useless now to indulge in vain regrets.

By the time it began to get so dusky that even his keen eyes had difficulty in making out the trail, he decided it was necessary to make use of the lantern.

They had come quite a distance, Wee Willie figuring it out as possibly a couple of miles, which must have been a conservative guess, Elmer

agreed. So he struck a match, and presently when the trail was taken up again the lantern light allowed them to see Perk's heavy tracks plainly.

Already they had changed their course considerably. Perk aimed to avoid pushing through many of the thickets, and rough places he encountered; which had a tendency to throw him now to the right, and again to the left, until naturally he became bewildered, and doubtless for the life of him could not decide in which quarter the cabin lay.

From the indications Wee Willie judged that he had stopped to cast a stone into numerous thickets, in expectation of starting a partridge out, which he hoped would betray that queer trick the other boys had been speaking about. When after much wandering, and repeated failures to score, Perk finally made up his mind that it was time for him to turn his face toward camp, he must have been thoroughly disgusted to discover that he did not have the slightest idea as to whether the cabin lay on the right, the left, before, or behind him; and that he was really and truly lost.

But then that did not have any great terror for Perk. He had been lost so many times before that it was getting to be an old story. Doubtless

he would keep on trying to "find himself" until he realized the hopelessness of it all, when he would philosophically sit down, to make a fire, and toast his shins, until such time as his mates came along with a rescue party; for he knew they could easily follow his tracks.

Perk, however, did not take certain possibilities into consideration, if he figured it out that way, for one thing the coming of the storm. At no other time when he played the part of the "babes in the woods" had anything like that overtaken him; and if there was one particular type of Nature's moods which Perk disliked most cordially it was a storm.

The lightning always made him jump; the thunder awed him; while the roar of a violent wind through the trees, sounding like a runaway railway train coming down the slope, made his flesh fairly creep. So that it can be seen an experience he would not soon forget faced the reckless woods wanderer on this occasion.

They had not been moving again very long after the lantern was lighted when Wee Willie called their attention to the moaning of the wind through the tops of the tall trees.

"That always means storm, according to my weather education," he affirmed; "anyhow, I

never yet knew it to fail. The clouds are working up all the time, too, boys. Guess we'll be swimming before a great while. Worst of all is the fact that once the water comes down, good-by to our tracking, for even Perk's heavy trail would soon be washed clean out."

"And not a single little woods varmint have we run across," suggested Elmer, who never failed to notice everything, "which shows that their instinct tells them there's something afoot, and that they'd better hug their underground holes, or hollow trees, for shelter."

"How weird that wind does sound through the treetops," said Amos, shuddering as he spoke. "You could almost imagine it came from some unseen spirits, or that the trees were gossiping, just like a pack of old women over their teacups."

Wee Willie had not thought of that, because he was a practical sort of fellow; but then Amos happened to be built along different lines, being given a lively imagination.

"Here's where Perk commenced to hurry some," observed Elmer at that juncture. "He must have begun to realize he didn't seem to be striking the river very fast, for he even ran a short distance, lumbering along like an ice-wagon, and falling more than a few times."

“Huh! getting some anxious, I warrant you,” grunted Wee Willie. “Began to be afraid he’d miss his supper if he didn’t do better.”

“Don’t say that,” urged Elmer, reprovably; “I’d rather believe Perk was thinking of the worry he might cause the rest of his chums.”

“Say,” snapped the other as quick as a flash, “forget what I said, please, fellows; it came from the lips, but not from the heart. I didn’t mean it, that’s right. Perk isn’t the chap to think of himself first; there never was a more loyal comrade, or one who wanted more to be of service to his pals.”

That was Wee Willie all over—too ready to say things of which he immediately repented, when he would strive to make amends. But Elmer liked him all the better on account of his quick temper, and habit of speaking without considering the result; Wee Willie had his faults, but to Elmer’s mind he was an angel compared with some sly fellows who seemed to have a perpetual sneer in their tones, and a curl to their upper lips.

“Wasn’t that distant thunder I heard then?” asked Amos.

“Just what it was,” Elmer admitted; “so we didn’t hit far out of the way when we decided we were in for a storm.”

“But it’s a long way off yet,” urged the other.

“That’s true, but when the wind starts to blow it doesn’t take long for a gale to strike home,” the boy with the lighted lantern reminded him.

“About how long would you give us before it arrives?” continued Amos.

“Anywhere from ten minutes to half an hour,” he was told. “Sometimes they take a notion to swing around, and attack from a new quarter; which holds things up more or less.”

“Huh! you never can tell what a crazy old storm will do,” grunted Wee Willie. “I’ve had ’em die down on me, but just when I was taking a good breath, slam bang! and the game was on again, the second edition being a heap worse than the original dose. It pays to keep right on the job when there’s a twister working your patch of the woods.”

“It pays to keep on the alert, no matter where you are. “Preparedness has won many a battle on the field, in business, and with private affairs. The fellow who is ready has three chances to one for the shiftless chap caught off his guard.”

It was not long before the distant boom of the thunder grew perceptibly louder, proving that the storm was advancing their way, and could not be much longer delayed in transit.

“We might holler a few times,” suggested Wee Willie, “and if by great good luck Perk is close enough to hear us, so much the better.”

“Go to it, then,” advised Elmer, knowing Wee Willie had a voice that would be apt to carry much further than his own, or that of Amos.

Without waiting for a second invitation the elongated chum threw back his head and sent forth one of his shrillest yells.

“Perk! oh! Perk! Hey! there!” he bawled.

“Perk! hey there!” came a startling mocking answer that caused Wee Willie to jump, and stare hard at Elmer.

“W-why, did y-you hear that?” he gasped.

“Only an echo,” the other told him. “It repeated your words after you. As a rule it requires some sort of elevation to create an echo; but they’ve been known to spring right up from what looked like level ground. A lot depends on the condition of the atmosphere. I’ve known of a mighty fine echo that would send back a double line at you like fun, and yet it came out of a marsh. I admit echoes have always been something of a puzzle to me; but that was one just now, all right.”

“A queer thing,” Amos hurried to say, “and at first I really thought it was Perk hiding close

by, and mocking Wee Willie here. Can you still follow his tracks, Elmer?"

"It's as easy as falling off a log," replied the one addressed, "but for a fact I'm more than surprised at Perk keeping it up so long. He must have been provoked with himself over getting lost, and determined to make the punishment fit the crime. Why, we've come more than three miles, up to now."

"If we're going to find him before that storm breaks, it's got to be done fast now," Wee Willie told them, when a still more resonant grumble followed what was plainly a distant flash of lightning.

"All we can do," advised the guide with the lighted lantern, "is to keep moving until we're up against it, when of course we'll have to try to find some shelter ourselves."

Wee Willie continued to let out a whoop from time to time. It amused him, at least, and could do no harm, while there was always a slender chance that Perk might hear and reply.

"Wow! things are getting pretty warm!" he announced shortly afterwards, when a really deafening crash followed quickly on the heels of a blinding electric display.

"I felt the first drop of rain on my face when

I looked up at that flash," said Amos, trying to show the utmost coolness.

"Yes, it's going to break right away," said Elmer.

"Perk, I wonder where you are?" Wee Willie remarked on a hazard, remembering what a dislike the lost chum invariably displayed toward all kinds of strife among the elements.

"Listen! what's that?" asked Amos. "Sounds for all the world like a regular young Niagara going over the falls."

"It means the rain is rushing down on us, and that we're going to be soaked through and through in a jiffy," Elmer told him.

Five minutes afterwards and they found themselves in the midst of as lively a summer gale as any of them had ever known, with the artillery in the heavens keeping up an almost constant booming, occupied by dazzling flashes of lightning; while to the right and to the left they could hear terrific crashing sounds as trees were laid prostrate before the fury of the hurricane wind!

CHAPTER XVI

WHERE WOODCRAFT PAYS

PROGRESS of course was utterly out of the question while all this racket continued. Indeed, even with the aid of the lantern, and the almost incessant flashing of the lightning, they could never have found the marks left by Perk in his erratic wanderings; for already had the downpour of rain washed them completely out of existence as though the trail had never been.

“No telling how long this is going to last, of course?” called out Amos, and his voice quivered more or less, despite his brave efforts to appear quite unconcerned, as a veteran of camp and trail should.

“It may soon be over,” replied Elmer, “and again there’s always a chance of such a storm holding out all night.”

“Wonder if we couldn’t find some sort of shelter?” ventured Wee Willie, doubtless voicing the thought that was in each of his companions’ minds.

“Let’s bear off in this direction,” suggested Elmer, turning toward the right, and as he carried

the lantern the others were compelled to follow him.

“But the trees seem to be getting smaller over here, Elmer,” protested the tall chum.

“Sure thing, I know that,” called the guide over his shoulder, “but we’re not looking for any big hollow oak, with all this lightning around, you know. Notice that the ground’s getting rocky, and that it begins to lie in queer ledges? I’ve seen just such places before, and I’m hoping we’ll run across a ledge that’ll hang out far enough to let us crawl underneath.”

“Wow! that’s the stuff!” admitted Wee Willie, apparently giving in to the judgment of his leader without any dispute.

“Something up ahead there that looks like it might pan out,” called Amos just then; though he could not feel sure he saw correctly, because of the water that ran down his face, and seemed at times to act as a sort of curtain hiding out the wretched picture.

“We’re in great luck!” cried Elmer, ten seconds later, “for here’s just the sort of ledge I had in mind, with plenty of room for all of us to creep under the outcropping shelf of rock.”

Down on hands and knees they went. This was no time for being particular, when the situation

was so desperate; a little dirt did not matter, for who does not know how the average boy manages to keep on good terms with grime, without letting its presence interfere at all with his appetite, or enjoyment.

“Whirr! whirr!”

“Hey! what’s all this?” bellowed Wee Willie, already screwed up in a knot, as he doubled his long legs in the endeavor to push further under the friendly shelf of rock, one of Nature’s freaks in that neck of the tall timber, but wonderfully acceptable to those caught in the wild storm.

“Only a covey of partridges we’ve scared out of their hiding-place,” Elmer instantly called back. “They thought they owned it, but we’ve put in a quit claim. All under, boys?”

“Say, this isn’t half so bad!” Amos exclaimed.

“It’s all right,” ventured Wee Willie, “if only we don’t get drowned in the water that’s going to ooze from our clothes. I reckon I weigh close on a ton right now; why, I could hardly lift my leg toward the last, I carried such a cargo of soaked stuff with me.”

They lay there panting for a while, “resting up,” as a boy would put it.

“Any port in a storm, the sailor says,” Elmer presently sang out, “and this time we can un-

derstand what that homely old phrase means.”

“Getting some chilly though, don’t you think?” said Amos, his teeth chattering as he spoke.

“Oh! that’s because we’re wet to the bone,” the tall chum asserted. “Since we can’t help ourselves we’ve just got to grin and bear it. Lots of fellows may be a heap worse off than we are right now.”

He was thinking of Perk, of course; but Amos had another person in mind when, during a brief lull in the roaring of the storm he was heard to groan, and say half to himself:

“I wonder where *he* can be; and if he’s out in all this terrible storm, poor old dad!”

Wee Willie might have reassured him had he chosen. He could have told Amos that those who have descended to the low level of becoming plain ordinary hoboes, tramping the highways, and counting the railroad ties in their peregrinations to and fro over the country, are as a rule, able to foresee the coming of bad weather, and generally manage to find some shelter in advance.

However, he did not say this, because to do so would hurt the feelings of Amos; who seemed still to have considerable love for the father he had not seen nor heard from for several long years.

How the minutes dragged!

Wee Willie, too, had now begun to shiver, though he would not have admitted that he was cold had he been accused of such a thing. While the rain did not gain admittance to the space under the overlapping ledge of rock, the wind could not be kept entirely out; and owing to their being so wet this caused them much inconvenience, to say the least.

“Don’t you believe it’s letting up some, Elmer?” pleaded Amos, after a bit.

“I was just thinking so myself when you spoke,” came the reply. “Yes, the rain, you see, has almost stopped, though the wind keeps up a great roaring in the tree-tops. But it’s lost some of its fury to boot; I haven’t heard a tree crash down for some time.”

“Huh! guess all the weak brothers have been knocked silly by now!” grunted Wee Willie, using this method of speaking because he could disguise the fact that his teeth were rattling like the castanets he had once seen a Spanish dancer use at a concert.

“Make up your mind, the performance is over for to-night,” Elmer thrilled them by declaring five minutes afterwards.

“Well, for goodness’ sake, don’t let’s do any-

thing to coax an encore," begged Amos. "But I can hear the rain coming down still, Elmer."

"I reckon now that's just the water dripping from the trees you hear," he was assured, which turned out to be the case.

They hugged their confined quarters for a short time longer; then Elmer made a move as though meaning to crawl out.

"Come along, boys!" he called; "we'll feel a heap better to get on our feet, and start the blood to circulating again."

"You said it, Elmer," honestly confessed Amos; "why, I'm shaking like I had the ague right now. And I'm not sure but that Wee Willie's going to fall to pieces soon if he keeps on the way he does, he's so loosely made up, you know."

"Oh! I guess not *yet* awhile," snapped the one referred to, who however lost no time in creeping out from under the ledge where the wise partridges had taken up their quarters for the night, anticipating a wet time.

No sooner was Elmer on his feet than laying the lantern aside he commenced slapping both arms violently about him, at the same time jumping up and down after the manner of a savage indulging in a dance.

“The only way to get your blood to circulating!” Wee Willie admitted, as he hastened to imitate the other’s example; and presently there were three dancers hopping about, and making wild gesticulations with their waving arms.

All of them began to feel considerably better, though their breath was soon coming in short pants.

“This is an improvement,” Elmer called out, “but we ought to have a fire!”

“Fire!”

That word always appealed to Wee Willie, even as a red rag does to an aggressive bull; he never needed more than half a hint to find an excuse for building one.

“Whoop! watch my smoke, fellows!” he cried, delightedly. “I’m some boy when you need a blaze. Don’t either of you dare to offer to help; because I’m the fire-maker of this circus!”

One thing that the tall chum always insisted on when in the woods was to carry his pet camp hatchet along with him wherever he went. Many times it was likely to prove a grievous burden, but should the occasion arise when its value could be fully appreciated, like the present, Wee Willie felt amply rewarded for his forethought.

He had it loose and ready before Amos could

have said "Jack Robinson," and picking out an old stump near by attacked it with great vigor, Elmer holding his lantern so that the chopper could see what he was doing.

Of course the fire-maker was after the dry heart of the stump, which could not have been soaked by the recent downpour. Soon he was collecting small splinters of this inflammable wood, until he had quite a decent pile laid by. At the base he inserted the finest and most tempting of fibers, to which he meant to apply a match presently; since this was certainly no time for him to show off his knowledge of wonderful though tedious ways for making a fire without the aid of common, every-day matches.

It matters little to one who had made a hobby of the subject, that everything around may be reeking with water; because he knows a variety of ways for producing the desired result. Many fellows less wise would have tried in vain, and used up their whole stock of matches in endeavoring to coax wet tinder to burn.

Amos gave an exclamation indicative of solid satisfaction when in response to the click of the match, carefully protected by Wee Willie's hat, a tiny blaze sprang up that rapidly increased in volume.

“Hurrah for you, Wee Willie! You’re surely the champion fire-builder of the universe. You’ll set the world on fire some of these days, if they don’t watch you pretty close. My but that feels fine already!”

“Oh! but I’ve got to have heavier stuff to put on top, or it’ll peter out on us,” objected the other, bustling about.

He must have figured on just where he could lay hold of the necessary supplies, for almost in a jiffy he started piling dead branches over the leaping blaze, which, rapidly drying out began in turn to take fire, until there was a delightful roaring pyramid of flames leaping cheerily upward, and sending out such glorious heat that the boys had to move back a foot at a time.

Their clothes also began to send out clouds of steam as the genial warmth commenced the drying process. Everybody showed signs of feeling a thousand per cent more comfortable; and there was no longer any necessity for their performing those wild antics, like warriors before the hunt or battle.

CHAPTER XVII

A GUEST AT THE CAMPFIRE

“WHY, I guess I’m all dry again,” Amos later on remarked with a degree of satisfaction in his words. “That heat certainly works fine. After all, it wasn’t such a terribly hard experience.”

Amos was like most other people who are prone to forget how they have suffered, once the sun of prosperity shines again; but then it is fortunate boys are so constituted that they can “put their troubles in their old kit-bag,” and be merry once more.

“Of course,” observed Wee Willie, “we can’t do a thing now till morning; even then our only job will be to keep on the move, and letting out an occasional whoop in hopes of reaching Perk. I’d sure give something to know what that same Perk is doing right now.”

“Elmer, what’s that moving out there?” gasped Amos, as though something suddenly ice-cold gripped his heart.

“Why, it seems to be a *man*, and he’s heading this way, too!” exclaimed the tall chum. “Say,

wouldn't it be a queer stunt now if this happened to be our—well, the party we scared out of the cabin at the Bend?"

Amos uttered a plaintive little cry, but hastily followed it by saying:

"No, it can't be, because you see he doesn't limp at all!"

The man continued to come straight toward them, though Elmer rather suspected that he was eyeing them closely as he advanced, possibly wondering who and what they were. At least he was no tramp, his appearance indicating more or less refinement; though to be sure he was fairly dripping just then, as though he had borne the full force of the downpour.

"Good evening, boys!" he called out as he drew near. "That fire certainly looks tempting; and if you've no objections I'd like to warm up a bit. Beastly storm, wasn't it? I seem to be pretty damp; but it doesn't matter; nothing really does when you make your mind up not to worry."

He held his hands out to the blaze as he finished. Elmer stared at him in a puzzled way. To meet such a light-hearted man after the passage of so dreadful a storm, and away up there in the woods, too, was rather bewildering.

“I suppose you’re all wondering who your unexpected guest will turn out to be, boys,” suddenly said the man, turning and surveying them keenly. “Allow me to introduce myself then as Doctor Frank Hitchens, connected with the State Institute for the Insane. I lost my connection with a party out searching this region for a clever inmate who managed to break away recently. At first I imagined you were my companions in the hunt; but as I drew closer I realized my mistake.”

“Oh! is that so, sir?” exclaimed Wee Willie, impulsively. “Why, we happened to meet your two friends recently. They came knocking at the door of our cabin, and at first thought they’d cornered their man. When they found we were only a party of boys from Chester, camping out, they asked a lot of questions; but we couldn’t give them any clue, of course. So you’re the doctor from the Asylum, are you, sir? If you come over on this side of the fire you can dry off without so much of the smoke striking you.”

“Thank you, son, I’ll do so,” the newcomer replied, suiting action to word.

He seemed to like to talk, as though the sound of his voice might be pleasant to his own ears. Elmer held back and listened, hoping to grasp

the situation better by observing the expressions that flitted in succession across the face of Dr. Hitchens.

In the first place, he concluded that the other must be unusually smart, for he seemed to be well posted on every kind of subject. As he spoke, Elmer saw frowns, and then shrewd looks flit across his face; from which he also concluded that the medical man must be the possessor of something of a temper; he really looked like one whom it would be unwise to irritate.

Wee Willie apparently was quite taken with the doctor. He asked various questions, and supplied all the information he had at his command, when the other wished to know this or that.

“Didn’t Collins or Andrews chance to mention my name to you, when they made their call last night; or happen to say they had missed connections with Dr. Frank Hitchens?” he finally inquired, cunningly, Elmer thought.

Wee Willie shook his head in the negative.

“Why, no, sir, not a word did those guards say about having any one else along,” he hastened to explain. “They had a dog with them, a sort of hound, I reckon, because he had long ears, and bayed like one; but somehow they didn’t seem to

get a whiff of the scent of the escaped lunatic.”

Wee Willie was wise enough not to say anything concerning the fact that they had frightened some one away from the cabin on first arriving. Since they were now of the opinion that party had been Mr. Codling, Amos's long-missing parent, it was only fair to that comrade nothing be said about his presence near by.

“By the way,” continued the doctor, with glittering eyes, “did the guards happen to mention the name of the—er, runaway?” and Elmer thought he caught a slight chuckle when that last word was forcibly pronounced.

“Why, yes, they told us his name was, let me see, Felix Something or other—oh! yes, Felix Gould; and that he was a mighty clever chap—used to be an actor in his palmy days, too, and just wonderfully smart.”

“He is all of that,” commented the other, with a faint smile on his face. “In fact, I don't believe I ever ran across a more engaging chap in all my wide experience than this same Felix Gould. The world had not treated his genius right, which was the main cause for all his mental troubles. But then they say everything comes to him who waits; and there are times when even

walls do not a prison make. Life still has compensations for all the ills flesh is heir to.”

His manner was really quite dramatic when saying this, Elmer noticed. As for Wee Willie, somehow he seemed to have fallen under the spell of the other’s masterful manner, for he sat there, and listened as though entranced, hardly able to take his eyes off the doctor’s mobile face.

And then with the abruptness shown by a bolt of lightning coming from what had been considered a clear sky, a thought suddenly sped through Elmer’s brain. It dazzled him, too, at first by its brilliance, yes, and thrilled him at the same time on account of the element of danger that accompanied the revelation.

Once this idea seized hold of him, Elmer watched the face of Dr. Hitchens more closely than ever. He was trying to read the secret of those rapidly working features, those glittering eyes, and the strange smile that every now and then crept into view, as though the physician might be taking infinite satisfaction in having found such a ready convert to his views in Wee Willie, whom he had apparently well-nigh hypnotized.

Amos chancing to turn his gaze toward Elmer saw the other make a quick little movement with

his head. It said "come here" as plainly as words could have done, an invitation Amos hastened to accept.

At the same time somehow or other he displayed considerable caution concerning his movements, though unaware just why he should do so. A minute afterwards and he dropped down alongside the other chum, who was so far as appearances went only interested in brushing off the lower extremities of his wrinkled trousers.

"What do you think of him, Elmer; a queer sort of a chap, that doctor is, it strikes me?" remarked Amos, in what he meant to be a low voice.

"Be careful how you speak, Amos," came in guarded tones. "I've been sizing him up and I don't like his looks. In fact, I think he is no other than Felix Gould himself!"

"Oh! my stars! the escaped actor lunatic!" whispered Amos, plainly aghast at hearing this startling announcement.

CHAPTER XVIII

ELMER HAS A PLAN

For a full minute nothing further passed between the two chums. Amos was slyly observing the newcomer, who continued to talk most eloquently, rattling along on some subject or other, and holding Wee Willie spellbound.

“Elmer!” finally whispered Amos.

“Yes,” came from the other, though Elmer did not desist from his occupation of making his trousers legs look more presentable, just as if it mattered in the slightest degree how creased or muddy they might be, off in the woods as they were, where no critical eye could ever detect the faults.

“I—guess—you’re right about that!” wheezed Amos.

“I’m getting more and more certain with every minute,” asserted the other. “I can see it in his shifty eyes, and his every action. Why, he’s as mad as anything, and has been playing a clever little trick on us. You must know these people who are out of their senses just love to imitate

other folks, and make believe they're Napoleon Bonaparte, General Grant, or some noted character in history. He chances to have a fancy for being the doctor at the asylum; perhaps he's studied his ways, and can take the other off to the life. But we're stacked up against a bunch of trouble, believe me, with *him* in camp."

"He'd be a dangerous man to tackle, I expect?" ventured Amos, dubiously.

"They always are hard to handle, I've heard," Elmer told him. "Why, even a weak looking woman, if out of her mind, and violent, will be all four men can manage; and at that she'll claw their faces something dreadful."

"Whew! but we ought to get rid of him, some way or other," continued Amos. "I wish I knew of a scheme to start: Elmer, how about you?"

Elmer did not reply immediately. He happened to notice that the furtive eyes of the man under suspicion chanced to be resting on them just then; and it was far from his wish to cause the other to suspect they knew his real identity.

Possibly Wee Willie asked some question just naturally, as he was deeply engrossed in certain things the "doctor" had been telling him; at any rate those searching eyes were again removed

from the vicinity of the spot where Elmer and Amos sat close together.

“As force is out of the question,” said Elmer, softly, “why the only thing left is strategy.”

“Yes—go on, please, for I just *know* you’ve got a scheme made up,” breathed Amos.

“Don’t look so hungrily at me while I’m talking, Amos,” he was told. “Try and grin, as if what I say might be funny. That man’s eyes are like those of a rat or a ferret, and can look right through you.”

It may have been but a wretched excuse for a laugh that Amos managed to emit; but at any rate such a sound would make it appear as though he were listening to some humorous observation on the part of his mate. Elmer, appeased by this, continued to “lift the lid,” as Wee Willie would term it, and explain what he had in mind.

“We’ll manage to break into the talk after a bit, understand, Amos,” he was now saying, “and don’t be surprised when I make a statement that isn’t exactly true. But those two guards *did* say they hoped to run across us again while up here in this neck of the woods; you heard them, Amos?”

“I certainly did,” came the quick reply.

“All right then, a fellow is allowed to stretch things just a little when the circumstances are as desperate as they seem to be with us right now. Well, I’m meaning to remark incidentally that we kind of expect them to drop in on us before morning; in fact, that they may see the light of our campfire any old time, and show up. Get that, Amos?”

The other actually chuckled, this time without much of an effort.

“I’m on to your game, Elmer,” he announced, eagerly.

“Do you think it’s a good one?” demanded the originator of the scheme.

“Simply great, and that’s a fact. Of course, if he was the genuine article he’d act as if delighted to know there was a chance for him to meet up with the balance of the search posse again.”

“Oh! don’t fool yourself about that, Amos; he’s too smart not to act as if tickled half to death at the prospect,” resumed Elmer. “I expect all that to happen.”

“Then how are we going to know whether he’s the real, or counterfeit article, Elmer?”

“They say the proof of the pudding is in the

eating of it, Amos. Lots of things in this world are different from what they seem to be on their face. No matter what his make-believe is, we'll know the truth by his actions, when he thinks no one is looking."

"You mean he's likely to skip out before morning, eh, Elmer?"

"There's a big chance that way, I reckon."

"Oh! I hope so, I certainly do," said Amos. "I never did like to run across any one who was out of his mind; they always made me feel queer. But I've just thought of something, Elmer, that might queer your fine game."

"Is it—Wee Willie?" asked the other, quickly.

"How on earth did you guess so easily, I'd like to know?" gasped Amos, quite taken aback for the moment.

"Just because I had thought about him myself," came the answer. "He's sitting there, and drinking in everything that chap tells him as if he might be in a daze. Yes, I wondered how he would take it when he heard me say I expected those two guards to join us any old time now."

"Gee! Wee Willie might blurt out something that would make him suspect you only said that so as to alarm him!"

“There’s only one way to prevent that,” his comrade told him. “I’ll be sure to catch his eye just before I say anything, and give him the high sign. Wee Willie knows what that’ll mean; he’ll understand that he’s got to keep his lips tightly buttoned up,—just sit there and listen. You’ll see how lucky it is we had all those signals arranged long ago.”

“That was your doing, Elmer; why, if you’d looked ahead, and seen just such an occasion as this, you couldn’t have fixed things better. But won’t Wee Willie be eating himself up with curiosity, though? He’ll wonder what under the sun it all means.”

“I expect to find a chance to tell him what’s in the wind, Amos; in fact it’s more than likely he’ll make such an opening himself, so as to be in the swim with us.”

“There, he’s watching us again, Elmer; just as if he suspected we might be talking about him by ourselves off here.”

Elmer laughed, and went on to act as if detailing some choice bit of gossip concerning one of their home pals in Chester. Amos, stirred to action by the necessities of the case, also managed to look as if tickled over something, although

merriment came hard with a fellow who for years now had been carrying such a load of anxiety and boyish sorrow on his shoulders, all connected with the episode of his father's vanishing, and the constant sad face of his mother.

Elmer did not believe in hurrying things. He knew that many a promising plan of campaign has been ruined simply through an application of too much haste. The night was long; indeed, it would likely seem interminable to the three lads who found themselves face to face with such an unpleasant experience. So he would wait patiently; possibly luck might favor them, and the unwelcome visitor announce his intention of leaving, a happening that would make the carrying out of his cleverly arranged plan unnecessary.

The minutes dragged past.

"I saw him yawn right then, Elmer; he's getting sleepy, I should say; which looks like he meant to stick by us to-night," Amos whispered, after another quarter of an hour had crept by.

The talkative "doctor" must have tired himself out, or else his mood changed, for he had about quit speaking to Wee Willie. In fact, the latter was also beginning to display unmistakable signs of being ready to turn in, the heat of the

crackling fire doubtless causing his eyes to grow heavy.

Elmer decided that the time was at hand for him to do something. Once their unwelcome guest lay down and went to sleep it would be too late.

First of all, he was watching to get the eye of the tall chum. Wee Willie on his part was suddenly surprised, and electrified as well, to see Elmer make a little movement with his hand which he easily understood to mean: "Don't open your mouth to say a thing when you hear me make a statement; you'll know all about it later on!"

Elmer repeated it so as to make sure the other understood, and when he saw Wee Willie make a similar movement he felt that matters were settled.

With that Elmer called out to the visitor:

"Of course you mean to bunk with us to-night, Doctor? Sorry we haven't anything to offer you in the way of food, but we came away from our camp in a big hurry, anxious about our missing chum, and failed to fetch grub along. But after the storm, with the woods all soaked with water, I guess a fire feels too good to leave; how about that, Doctor?"

Elmer wisely made out to use that designation whenever possible; he fancied it might please the other, and allay any suspicion he might have been entertaining toward the speaker. Those wonderfully keen eyes seemed almost to pierce Elmer, as the other surveyed him closely.

“Thank you, that’s very kind,” he remarked, smoothly; “and I think I shall accept the invitation in the same spirit it is given. Yes, this fire does warm one up, after such a soaking; and it would be foolish for me to leave such good company.”

“There’s another reason why you ought to stay with us, Doctor,” continued Elmer, looking so innocent that Amos made up his mind the other was built for a clever actor.

“Indeed, what might that be, I’d like to know?” said the other, with a vein of sudden alarm in his voice.

“Why, the chances are we’ll be joined by two good friends of yours between now and sunrise,” continued the boy. “I mean Collins and Andrews, those fine fellows you brought with you from the asylum, when you came in search of that cunning Felix Gould!”

The man was silent for a full minute. He

seemed to be pondering over something, for he frowned, and then forced himself to look pleasant.

“That is rare good news you are giving me, my young friend!” he burst out, though had he chanced just then to have turned his head and looked at Wee Willie, to note the expression of blank bewilderment to be seen on his freckled face, he might have felt less confidence. “What makes you think there will be a reunion of forces to-night? Collins and Andrews are great cronies of mine, whom I shall, of course, be delighted to meet again.”

“Why, they said they meant to put in the day searching the woods up here; and something seems to tell me they’ll surely drop in.”

“It is very kind of you to tell me such delightful news,” the other replied. “Yes, I’ll cuddle down here by your fire, and snatch a little sleep, of which I am in great need; though food is something I’d like to see before me as well.”

They all lay down as if to sleep, but it was a very alert group indeed, stretched out there, including the “doctor.”

CHAPTER XIX

THE LONG, LONG NIGHT

“WHAT does it all mean, Elmer?”

Wee Willie whispered this as he managed to roll over close to the other. It had been just what Elmer was counting on, ever since the tall chum threw himself down as if carelessly; but nevertheless picking out a spot where he could manage to get in contact with his leader.

“Sh! keep your voice down lower still; he must have the ears of a rabbit—all these crazy people have!” Elmer told him, cautiously.

“Wow! do you mean that?” gasped the other, plainly staggered by what he had just heard.

“Listen, and I’ll tell you about it.”

It took Elmer only a brief time to do this, for he chose his words, and made sure not to add unnecessary details, leaving something to the lively imagination of the other.

So Wee Willie had the scales removed from his eyes. He understood now how the glib tongue of the cunning escaped lunatic had somehow dulled his wits, and lulled his suspicions to sleep.

“Gee! so he’s that dangerous Gould chap, is he?” he murmured, as though it might be difficult

for him to grasp this amazing truth. "He sure had me all balled up by his talk. My cousin out west'd say I'd been locoed, and I reckon it looks that way. But ought we go to sleep like innocent babes in the woods, with such a live wire in camp, and he a luny?"

"I don't mean to," Elmer assured him. "Some one ought to keep awake so as to watch him, and I guess I'm IT in this case. Already Amos is drowsy, even if he does know about the danger hanging over our heads; and I've an idea you'd let yourself doze if put on guard."

"Huh! try me, that's all, Elmer," whispered the other, a bit indignantly.

"You can do as you feel like," he was told; "but as for me I expect to stay awake. And if he's watching us right now perhaps we'd better break away, or he'll be thinking there's something up."

Amos tried very hard to keep his heavy eyes from closing. Time and again he would nod and nod, and then with a start rub his knuckles into his eyes; but presently the whole performance was renewed, until finally he simply slipped over, and remained motionless on the ground.

Elmer looked at him with considerable compassion.

“Poor chap,” he was saying, under his breath, “he’s had little sleep since we got up here, what with worrying about that wandering dad of his!”

The camp was very quiet, save for now and then the snapping of the flames as they ate their way into the log Elmer had piled on the fire. Wee Willie had also tried to keep awake, and for a time seemed to be successful; but in the end Elmer had reason to believe that he, too, was fast succumbing to the sway of the slumber king, for he nodded violently, and could hardly keep his head off his chest.

It must have been well on to midnight when Elmer noticed the first move on the part of the “doctor.” The man was sitting up and observing them with a steady gaze. Undoubtedly he was trying to discover whether any one of his companions could be awake and in a position to notice what he did.

Elmer held his breath, but did not move. He had so fixed matters that he could see all that went on, though a crooked elbow shielded his face from the betraying firelight.

Wee Willie breathed hard. He was fast asleep at last, despite his positive assertion that nothing could tempt him to lose himself.

Now the man had started to get to his hands

and knees. Elmer wondered what he meant to do, and the possibility of rank treachery, such as crazy persons are likely to display on the least occasion, filled him with dismay. He felt a queer thrill pass through his frame as the man arose stealthily.

Another minute would tell the tale, Elmer realized. Should the insane man start to approach their side of the now half-dying fire it was his intention to arouse his two companions with a shout, and spring to his own feet.

Earlier in the evening Elmer, looking ahead to possibilities, had managed to drop several billets of wood close to the spot where he and his mates expected to lie. These would come in handy as clubs in case there were actual hostilities, which he fervently hoped might not prove to be the case.

He afterwards declared that it seemed to him his heart jumped up in his throat when he saw the man actually take one step toward them. Fortunately Elmer controlled his feelings, and made no move to betray the fact that he was awake.

Relief swept over him upon discovering that the other had changed his mind, if he really intended doing anything serious; for once more he turned and crept away.

Elmer watched his receding figure as long as he could make it out. Then it became merged in the dim moonlight, and their unwelcome guest had gone!

Wee Willie, sound asleep, felt something grip him. He instantly started to sit up, though only half awake as yet.

“W-what’s doing?” he muttered, unable to grasp the situation.

“I only thought you’d like to know he’s gone,” said Elmer, quietly.

The other was by now fully aroused and seemed to understand what was meant.

“You mean Fe—er, the Doctor, do you, Elmer?” he demanded.

“No other,” he was told.

Wee Willie stared across to where he had last seen the recumbent figure of their unwelcome guest.

“Glad to hear the news, that’s right; when did he slip away?” he asked.

“Oh! about ten minutes or so back,” he was informed. “I waited to make sure of it before I waked you.”

Amos sat up just then.

“What’s this I heard you say, Elmer; that he’d quit us?” he demanded eagerly.

So Elmer had to tell the story of his seeing the insane man get to his feet, and how at one time he even feared the other meant to creep toward them, which would have surely spelled trouble for everybody.

“But I’m glad to say he changed his mind,” he concluded, “and went away peacefully; so I reckon there’ll be no need of these bully clubs I managed to get together for use in case of a racket.”

“Gee! what a high old time we’d have had, if the fight came off,” speculated the lanky one, with half a chuckle. “Some of us might have had welts all over our bodies that’d spoil our whole outing. Yes, I’m glad myself it didn’t happen that way. I don’t mind a class rush, or a football tackle, but excuse me from battling with a crazy man.”

“Well, I’m shaking hands with myself over the narrow escape,” Amos observed, “and Elmer, I want to say right now that dodge of yours worked like magic. He concluded he didn’t care much to stay over, and meet up with his warm friends Collins and Andrews from the State Asylum; in which I should say he showed a whole lot of wisdom; for they’d have simply declined to let him wander off again.”

“But say, I’m a whole lot sorry about one thing,” remarked Wee Willie.

“Tell us about it then,” urged Elmer.

“Think of the poor chap going without a single bite for perhaps days and days, ever since he broke out of the institution, mebbe,” continued the tall chum, shaking his head sympathetically. “He said it was a whole day, but I’ve got a sneaking notion it might have been a heap longer’n that. If we’d had our grub with us I’d certainly have cooked him a bouncing meal. He’s human, even if deranged, poor old chap!”

From which it can be seen that Perk was not the only member of the Camp Fire Boys’ Club who had a tender heart, and was able to feel for any one in distress, especially when hungry. Such a dreadful condition was calculated to appeal to a boy more than anything else on the calendar.

“Well, what’s next on the program?” asked Amos, yawning again.

“I’d say sleep would be the most acceptable to some fellows,” laughed Elmer.

“But would it be safe, do you think, with that crazy man hanging around?” Wee Willie put out at a hazard. “They’re all mighty sly, remember; and when he made out to walk away mebbe it was all a big bluff. He might be meaning to creep back here like a red Injun, and take us by surprise.”

“Then we hadn’t better all sleep at once,” suggested Amos, aroused once more by this dismal prophecy on the part of the other. “Now since I’ve had a few winks myself it seems only right I should take the first watch.”

“What time do you reckon it is, near daylight?” queried Wee Willie; but on putting it to a test by means of the little nickel watch, it was learned that the night had by no means advanced that far; in fact it was just twelve.

“Which means we’ve got about five more hours before the peep of dawn,” Elmer was saying. “Now let’s make ourselves comfortable again, and every one try to keep awake; but there must be no talking, remember.”

Elmer knew what the result would be, but he expected to keep on the alert himself every minute of the time, and saw no reason for the others doing likewise. And the result justified his confidence, for first Amos fell off, and later on even Wee Willie’s nods as before became more frequent, until finally his head lay on his breast.

Carefully Elmer managed to ease the strained position of the tall chum, so that in the end Wee Willie was stretched out alongside Amos, and both of them sleeping just as soundly as though snugly tucked in their own beds at home.

It was a long, long night to Elmer.

Only his masterful will kept him awake through those dragging hours. He heard the screech-owl whimpering to his mate; listened to the barking of a red fox somewhere in the brush near by; knew when a 'coon scampered out of the way as the fire, replenished with another log while all of the boys were awake, snapped sharply, and threw out a sudden red glow.

Yes, it must have been one of the longest nights in all Elmer's experience, but when the first faint streaks of daylight began to appear through the trees lying toward the east he felt satisfied that he had not broken his word given to himself that he must not once waver in his self-appointed task.

The insane man had not returned, but then there had been no certainty concerning this. No one could tell what a mind diseased might conjure up; and while they had treated Felix Gould in a friendly spirit he might not be able to appreciate this, and even look upon them with suspicion, as intending to hand him over to those who searched the tall timber for an escaped lunatic.

And so when daylight came on Elmer, poor tired fellow, felt glad.

CHAPTER XX

ONCE MORE ON THE TRAIL

At least the signs all pointed to its being a fine day. Elmer was glad of that, for they expected to have their hands full finding Perk; and a continuation of the storm of the preceding night must have broken up their plans more or less, besides proving uncomfortable.

He was in no hurry to arouse the others.

“Let them sleep,” he said to himself, with a whimsical look on his own rather peaked face; “they need it, poor chaps; and neither of them is as used to doing without as I’ve schooled myself to be.”

So he moved about just as softly as possible while replenishing the fire; and it was really the flames snapping that finally aroused Wee Willie. He sat upright, and still rubbing one eye stared rather sheepishly at Elmer.

“Huh! a fine sentry I’d make, I guess, to sleep on my post,” he mumbled scornfully. “For five cents I’d ask some one to give me sixteen good kicks.”

“Oh! that’s far too much hard cash,” chuckled

Elmer; "lots of fellows would be glad to do it for nothing, Wee Willie. But let's forget our troubles now the morning's come, and our unwelcome guest hasn't returned."

"Yes, one trouble seems to have skipped out; but there are others still," complained the tall chum. "First there's Perk missing, and nobody knows which way to look for him, now the trail's all washed out. Then the second thing that makes me sad is the lack of breakfast."

He put both hands on his stomach, and grunted dismally.

"I guess it hasn't happened but a few times in all my whole life," he went on to confess, "that Wee Willie has been forced to go hungry in the morning; and I want to tell you right now it's little short of a calamity in my estimation. Why, I'll be shaky all day long; you can't expect to keep the furnace agoing without stoking once so often."

"But how about that cake of chocolate each of us took along, so as to stave off starvation?" asked Elmer, maliciously.

His chum made a wry face.

"Well, you see chocolate may be all very fine in its place; but it never can make me forget how much I love coffee, bacon and eggs, with flapjacks to wind up the meal on. Now don't think I'm

scorning chocolate, because it isn't so; I'll eat every scrap of my cake, and be glad to have it; but oh! what an empty void there'll be after I'm done."

Amos must have heard them talking, for he now sat up and wanted to know who had mentioned coffee.

"Thought I whiffed it brewing, for a fact," he sniffed, making a wry face, "but it was all imagination. Think of starting a whole long day on a silly piece of chocolate; but if the rest of you can stand it I'm not going to kick."

"That's sensible of you, Amos," laughed Elmer; "though kicking wouldn't be apt to help matters any, it strikes me. Let's sit around and talk of our late visitor."

"Yes, we'd like to hear more details about how he went away," urged the lengthy chum, as he clawed in a pocket for the square of hard chocolate, which upon being produced he started to gnaw at eagerly as if the mere thought of having no breakfast in prospect made him simply ferocious for something upon which to "fill up."

Elmer told all he knew as they sat there, waiting for the sun to appear and warm the chilly early morning air, before thinking of making a start.

“Well, I’m glad for one,” ventured Amos, “he decided to take French leave, and it was all owing to your fine trick, Elmer, in making him believe those two asylum guards were around here, and apt to drop in on us any old time. Only for that he might be sticking to us as tight as any old plaster; or the Old Man of the Sea who fastened himself to the back of Sindbad the Sailor, you may remember, and refused to dismount.”

They were not long in making way with their scant allowance of chocolate. Elmer knew that it would be of considerable benefit in allaying the pangs of hunger; but Wee Willie could not forgive himself for not fetching a supply of “real stuff” along.

“Shucks! we might have known we’d be out all night, and want breakfast after a hard day’s work, and a night in the open, without even our blankets to make things seem halfway cozy. Catch me doing such a silly trick again—if I do I’ll eat my hat, believe me.”

“The Camp Fire Boys never make the same mistake twice running,” boasted Amos, and then in a lower voice adding: “though they do have a way of finding out fresh ways for doing the wrong things.”

“They’re only human, and you know what is

said about it being the common lot of man to err," Elmer told him. "But if we make it a practice to learn something every time we find we've figured wrong, we'll soon be all puffed up with knowledge."

So they chatted, often in a joking vein, as boys sometimes will on whose shoulders troubles fall even as lightly as water on a duck's back.

"About time we thought of starting out, isn't it?" asked Amos, showing a return of his eagerness, the others could easily guess why, knowing what they did about his intense interest in the tramp whom their coming had disturbed when in possession of the cabin at the Bend.

"Yes, for now the sun is up, and by degrees the woods will dry out," Elmer decided. "After such a drenching rain we'll find every little creek full to the banks, though they'll soon lower again, I reckon."

"What about my tuning up, and giving Perk the merry ha! ha?" demanded Wee Willie, who apparently must feel in good voice.

"Whenever you please," Elmer told him; "we'll try not to be frightened at the racket, knowing it's only you."

Wee Willie looked queerly at him, and then went on to say half humorously:

“Huh! don’t know whether to take that as a compliment or not. Makes me think of that fable of old Æsop about the lion and the donkey going hunting in company, and coming to a cave where a flock of goats had taken refuge. You see, it was arranged that the donkey should go inside, and frighten the game out; while the lion would lie in wait, and kill the goats as they appeared. Well, Jack went in and began to hee-haw, and carry on something fierce; the goats came rushing out, and the lion got his dinner all right. After everything was over the proud donkey appeared, and asked his partner what he thought of his performance. ‘Did I do my part well?’ he wanted to know. ‘Elegantly,’ the lion told him; ‘you made the greatest noise I ever heard; and in fact I myself might have been frightened if I hadn’t known that you were only a donkey!’ ”

Of course both Amos and Elmer laughed, and Wee Willie, too, joined in, for he was one of that kind of fellows who are capable of appreciating a joke, even at his own expense.

Elmer showed his careful woodcraft training by making sure that every ember of the fire was utterly extinguished before quitting the scene of their night’s camp. He knew full well about the danger that always lurks in a fire left smoulder-

ing by those breaking camp; for later on perhaps a violent wind might arise that would carry the red embers into some patch of dead leaves, and thus result in a serious conflagration. Tens of thousands of acres of most valuable woodland have been annually destroyed just through such criminal carelessness. If hunters and campers would only exercise the proper amount of care, most of these forest fires might be avoided, and beautiful timber tracts remain intact, to delight the eyes of those who sought their solitudes for rest and recreation during vacation times.

At last they got started.

Every little while Wee Willie would throw back his head and awaken the echoes with a really stentorian whoop, such as might well have made an Indian brave look envious. They always listened afterwards with a degree of eagerness, in hopes of catching some return call; but time after time it went with only a mocking crow winging its flight overhead uttering a derisive "caw"; or else a bluejay scolding the invaders of its woods haunt.

Elmer tried to figure out about what course Perk was most apt to take. In so doing he had their recent experience to guide him; for he easily remembered how the lost boy kept unconsciously

edging toward the *left*, as wanderers most generally do.

“I notice you keep on the watch all the while, Elmer,” said Amos; “while Wee Willie and myself use our eyes to scan the woods on every side, hoping to discover a sign of a moving form, or maybe a handkerchief waving at us from some far-away tree on a rise, you scan the ground. Do you expect to run across his trail again, where he started in after the rain was over?”

“I can’t say I expect that, Amos,” he was told, quietly; “but it’s always possible, you know. Perk must be somewhere within five miles of us right now, if only we could get in touch with him.”

“It would certainly be a grand good thing if we did raise his track once more,” Wee Willie attested; “we’d keep on like so many wolves chasing their quarry, until we ran him down. But, Elmer, I hope we won’t have any difficulty about making our way back to camp after we pick Perk up?”

There was a tiny vein of anxiety in the tall chum’s query; in fact, Wee Willie was speculating at the time whether he could contrive to live through the day with just that small cake of chocolate to sustain his sinking energies. Already

he began to claw at any berries he chanced to see close to his hand in passing, as though the red Antwerps might help him ward off the dreadful feeling of distress that came with "Nature abhorring a vacuum."

"I've got my bearing well in hand," he was calmly assured. "Just as soon as we find our chum you'll see me head around, and I warrant I can take you in a bee-line to our jolly old cabin."

"That's the right name to give it, Elmer," agreed Wee Willie, contritely. "At first it looked so forlorn and disreputable that any style seemed to fit the outfit; and I guess I tacked on a lot of sarcastic names such as 'old,' 'shack,' 'shanty,' and the like. But, say, right now I beg pardon; that same cabin holds the wherewithal that links my body to this earth, all our stock of delicious food, and for that reason if nothing else, it's going to be the 'dear old cabin' to me from this time on."

Elmer came to a sudden stop, and held up his hand.

"Listen!" he said abruptly.

CHAPTER XXI

“TOOT—TOOT—T-O-OOT!”

HARDLY had half a minute silently passed when a thrill shot through each figure. No cawing crow could make that peculiar sound; no red-headed woodpecker tapping at the rotten limb of a tree utter a scream of similar import.

Elmer did not, like some boys would have done, immediately whirl triumphantly on his mates, and say impressively: “What did I tell you?” On the contrary he looked very happy as he simply said: “Sound familiar, boys?”

“It’s Perk, all right!” snapped Amos, joyously.

“Yes,” added Wee Willie in a tone of absolute relief, as though a tremendous weight had dropped from his narrow shoulders, “that’s the gay toot of the old tin fox-and-geese horn Perk always makes a habit of carrying around with him.”

“I agree with you, boys,” said Elmer simply, as he once again started to “lead the pack.”

All of them became quite merry from that moment on. It was as though the expectation of having their long quest rewarded by the discovery of the lost chum filled them with supreme happiness.

Naturally the first thing that sprang from this condition of affairs was a revival of reminiscences connected with that self-same tin horn of Perk's, now destined to have new glory placed to its credit.

“I remember how Perk always carries that old horn along with him everywhere,” said Wee Willie, with a laugh. “Why, last winter when we went in sleighs to country barn-dances, on the way home at midnight, with the moon right overhead, and every fellow trying to get ahead in the mad race back, above the calls of the boys, and the laughing and shrieks of the girls when there was an upset, you could always hear that old horn tooting like mad. Perk just couldn't be happy without it. They say he takes it to bed with him; and one night frightened his folks half to death by sending out horrible squawks while in his sleep.”

That caused all of them to laugh again, for they were feeling decidedly merry by now. Impending success always begets such a condition with boys, who only see the present, or the immediate future, and do not worry as to what Time may have in store for them.

“There was another story told about Perk and his horn that I remember,” mused Amos.

“Sounds almost too rotten silly to be true, and I kind of half suspect some fellow manufactured it. But they say that last Fall, in the thrilling football game between Chester High and that strong eleven coming up from Bellwood when luck allowed our chum, playing with Chester, to kick the deciding goal, while the crowd yelled like mad, his old horn was heard above all the din; and they do say he had it with him all along, concealed somewhere; but everybody laughs when they tell you that yarn, so I reckon it’s all made up out of whole cloth.”

“Give him another whoop, W. W.!” said Elmer.

Gladly did the tall chum avail himself of the privilege, and this time they felt a full confidence while listening for a response.

“There, that’s the boy, all right!” cried Wee Willie. “We ought to congratulate each other on the success of our search, because the game is winding up.”

“So is Perk, it seems,” chuckled Amos, in amusement, as other weird blasts came to their ears, all from the same quarter.

Elmer changed his course just a trifle. It was like a mariner after a storm adjusting his compass once more, now sure of his points, after being

able to take a reckoning during a burst of sunlight.

How different everything looked under the new order of things! No one longer thought the woods gloomy, or filled with unknown perils; the cheery sunlight breaking through the opening overhead seemed to cast a halo over the aisles of the tall timber, making them look like fairyland itself, such is the effect of impending victory on the human mind.

"I wonder if the poor fellow is nearly half starved at that?" Wee Willie was saying, as he trudged ahead; for no one could think of a single thing that did not have some bearing on Perk.

Amos was seen to tap his pocket suggestively, as though wishing to make assurance doubly certain before speaking.

"Well, I've kept his square of that fine chocolate carefully, and it'll be pretty refreshing, I reckon. You all know that Perk is wildly fond of the stuff, and eats it by the yard, week in and week out. They say that's one reason of his being so fat."

"Aw! they're only joshing you, Amos," chortled Wee Willie. "He comes by that just naturally, you see. When Nature shapes a boy to be as round as a rain barrel it doesn't matter

one whit what he eats, or how much, he's bound to keep on filling out. Just the same way if a fellow's going to be thin and scrawny, like me, f'r instance, you c'n stuff and stuff him with every sort of fattening food; and, say, he keeps on growing skinnier all the while. I've been through that thing, and there's absolutely nothing in it. I eat because I like my food, and not just to try to pick up a pound or two of flesh."

Elmer laughed as if amused. He knew Wee Willie's principles of old, and doubtless also fancied there was considerable of good hard common-sense in what he had just said.

By now the blare of the fish horn was quite loud, as from time to time it continued to well forth. Wee Willie occasionally sent out an answering yell, just to reassure Perk.

"It's going to make our work lighter if he keeps on tooting away," was his explanation for this periodical outburst. "If all of a sudden he let up, why, we might have some trouble in actually locating Perk; because, you see the woods are growing mighty dense around here. Such monster trees, too; I don't believe I've seen their equal anywhere about Chester. Why, you'd nearly think you were out among those monster redwoods of California."

“There’s one that’s hollow,” observed Amos, pointing; “and what a fine old refuge the big cavity would be in a snow-squall, for it faces the south. A hunter caught in a big fall of snow could even have a little fire going to keep warm by, if he took care not to burn his house down in the bargain.”

“There’s one that must have been struck by a bolt last night,” suddenly observed Elmer, with a touch of awe in his voice; for the wreck of the great forest monarch was supreme, branches and splintered wood covering all the immediate neighborhood.

“I’m glad Perk didn’t forget what he’s been told about such things, and seek shelter in a hollow tree while a thunder storm was raging,” Amos continued. “A poor chap wouldn’t know what hurt him, if he had been in that tree, or even hiding under its sheltering branches, when the bolt fell.”

Elmer turned a trifle more to the left. That last toot gave him his clue, and he felt certain now that even though they should catch no further signals from Perk’s fish-horn he could pilot the expedition straight to the spot where the missing chum was awaiting their coming.

“Why, he’s right close by,” said Wee Willie.

“Given ten minutes more, and we’ll be shaking his hand,” affirmed the guide, positively.

“Good old Perk!” Wee Willie could be heard saying over and over, while his freckled face fairly beamed with satisfaction.

It spoke well for the sunny disposition of the rotund comrade when his mates displayed such enthusiasm over the prospect of once again coming in personal contact with him. And it must be remembered that the separation was only a matter of less than twenty hours; whereas from the wild ebullition of their feelings one might fancy Perk had been gone for ages and ages.

Perhaps in times past the queer sound of that battered horn which was Perk’s especial delight may have jarred on the nerves of Wee Willie, for it certainly produced what might be called a discordant series of notes; but just now he reckoned them the sweetest chords he had ever known; which only goes to prove the truth of that old saying to the effect that “circumstances alter cases.”

Suddenly there was a startling movement, and some object broke from the heavy brush to one side of them, dashing away with great speed; while the trio of boys stood there as if rooted to the spot.

CHAPTER XXII

NOT SO SLOW, AFTER ALL

“HELLO! hello! Perk!” called the long-legged chum.

“Hi! there, Wee Willie! you’ve been an *awful* long time coming!” said a voice so close by that it thrilled them through and through.

They instinctively started on a gallop, broke past a screen of bushes that lay in a little opening of the timber, and there saw Perk, standing with outstretched hand, and a wide grin ornamenting his glowing face.

Elmer actually threw his arms about the boy, he was so wildly glad to see him once more safe and sound; Wee Willie, too, did not seem ashamed to follow suit; while Amos less familiar, seemed satisfied to pounce upon one of Perk’s chubby hands, which he started working up and down as methodically as though he had been a milkman, as the tall chum said, and was schooled in the method of adding to the daily output of the herd by means of the barn pump.

Perk was laughing, even while his eyes showed

plain signs of being humid, so great was his emotion.

“Say, don’t squeeze me into a jelly, boys, please!” he breathlessly protested, in mock seriousness. “Why, you’d think I was the Prodigal Son come home to Dad’s house to help eat the fatted calf. And speaking of *eating*, oh! have any of you got a crumb, or something to stay the awful feeling of emptiness in the pit of my stomach?”

Amos thereupon dragged out the square of chocolate, possibly mentally lamenting that he had been so greedy as to devour every scrap of his own cake. Upon this fat Perk descended like a hawk, though the others were more or less surprised to see him scrupulously divide it in exact halves before consenting to put a particle of it in his mouth.

“Yum! yum! that *does* go to the spot!” he hastened to mumble, rubbing his paunch with evident gratification; while the look in his eyes as much as said: “The only bad thing about is the limited supply.”

“How did you put in the time while that storm was booming, we all want to know, Perk?” Wee Willie was now saying.

At that the other grinned happily.

“Oh! I’ve had a wonderful time, all told, fellows,” he announced. “Since I left camp I’ve been through a heap of adventures, believe me. No use harping on a disagreeable subject, so you’ll just have to imagine how I got twisted up in my bearings, and finally had to admit that I was once more in the same old fix,—actually and truly lost.

“Then the storm caught me while I was sitting beside a little fire I’d managed to make, for these days you know I always keep a supply of matches on hand for just such emergencies. Well, it put my fire out in short order, and there I was, getting soaked to the skin, and picking my way along through the black woods, not knowing when I might run slap against a hungry wild cat, or else that bear we saw up in the tree.

“After I got so wet it didn’t matter, I just kept moving about till the storm let up. Then feeling chilly I began trying out the setting-up exercises that they use in the army, which soon made me comfy again.”

“No use talking, you are improving, Perk,” said Wee Willie, admiringly.

“Oh! I’m getting there, by degrees,” the other

told him, with a queer look on his face that even Elmer could not understand; Perk seemed to be cherishing a secret of some sort, which he was loath to impart until he had piqued their curiosity to the utmost; that was all Elmer could settle in his mind.

“But you’re fairly dry right now, seems like,” said Amos; “how did you manage to do that, Perk, if it’s a fair question?”

“Fire, again,” chuckled the other; “nothing like it to dry you out; only it did make me feel homesick to see those flames playing so merrily, and me without a single scrap of grub to keep up my strength—that was really the worst part of the whole business, boys.”

“But with everything so soaking wet around, how did you manage to get a fire started?” demanded Wee Willie, incredulously.

“Huh! needn’t think you’ve got a foreclosure on *all* the woodcraft knowledge that’s lying around loose, Wee Willie,” snorted the fat chum, grimly. “Say, I’ve been taking lessons, and experimenting in some of the ways you have for making a fire. I haven’t so far been able to bring a blaze by means of a twirling stick with a bow to turn it; but shucks! it isn’t any great punkins

to knock some dry wood out of an old log, and start it to going, if you've only got plenty of matches along; which was what I did!"

Wee Willie whistled, to indicate his surprise. Really it was next door to thrilling to know how the once dull Perk seemed to be picking up points in woodcraft; even though he did persist in still getting lost periodically.

"You're sure a comer, Perk!" declared the tall chum. "Mebbe I'll be glad to sit at your feet and soak in wisdom one of these days."

"No blarney or soft soap, please, fellows," continued the other, suspecting that they were only "joshing" him. "I hope I am improving, that's all; and that some day I'll even learn how to find my way back to camp on a bee-line. But whew! it was something fierce when that bolt shivered one of the big trees not so far away. I thought for sure my time had come, it sort of knocked me over, you see."

"We had something of the same experience," Elmer told him; "and can understand how uneasy you must have felt."

"Only," added Amos, quickly, "Elmer managed to pilot us to where there was a fine shelf of rock, under which we crept, so as to get out of the

downpour. We didn't dare stay under a tree, with all that lightning bursting around us."

"I knew that too," Perk hastened to explain, "and so I passed by a splendid hiding place in a hollow oak. It looked mighty tempting, though, when I first discovered it by a flash of lightning; and I had to take a grip on myself to keep from giving in."

"You certainly deserve a heap of credit, Perk; we're proud of you," he was told by Elmer, which praise made the fat boy's blue eyes gleam with supreme happiness; Perk evidently considered it the highest possible honor to be complimented by the one to whom he was accustomed to look as a leader.

"Of course, I tumbled around a good bit while making my way along in the dark," the other frankly continued; "and I'm scratched up something fierce; but it's all in the game, and you won't hear me squealing any, boys. I'm only thankful it's finished as well as it has; and mebbe I've picked up a few points for taking care of myself in the wilds. Anyhow I c'n make a fire, no matter how wet everything is around; and say, that's something worth while—for Perk!"

Again and again did he look particularly at

Amos, Elmer could not help noticing; and he found himself wondering why the new chum should engage so much of Perk's attention. There was also something most mysterious in the way he kept grinning; Elmer knew Perk in and out, and could not understand what the other had concealed "up his sleeve." Usually frankness itself, Perk must be practicing a new rôle to act in this fashion, Elmer concluded. He would certainly bear watching, for he acted as though hardly able to keep from springing some surprise on them.

"But you fellows are as dry as a bone!" Perk now exclaimed, as he put his hand caressingly on Elmer's sleeve; "so I reckon you either didn't get wet in the storm, or else have dried off since before a jolly blaze."

"Oh! we had a fire, all right," mentioned Wee Willie, "and got dry in almost no time. The blaze had a result, though, we didn't figure on."

"What was that?" demanded the other curiously, again grinning mysteriously.

"Oh! it was seen by some one, and we found we had an uninvited guest," explained Wee Willie.

"Huh! you don't tell me; now that's some

queer!” exploded Perk, round-eyed by this time.

“Who was your visitor, Wee Willie?”

“A dapper-looking chap who told us he was Doctor Hitchens, from over at the State Asylum for the Insane,” said the tall chum. “He was a wonderful talker, you must know, and fairly got me under his spell. But fortunately Elmer here sized him up at his true worth. Whom do you think he turned out to be, Perk?”

“Not—the—tramp?” gasped the other, incredulously.

“Shucks! no,” retorted Wee Willie, disdainfully; “who but that cunning Felix Gould, the chap you may remember those uniformed guards were looking for when they knocked at our cabin door the other night.”

Perk was seemingly much impressed by this startling information.

“Gee whiz! tell me all about it, Wee Willie,” he hastened to cry. “How did Elmer know; what happened later on; and how did you manage to get rid of the crazy man without having trouble?”

This was just the opening wedge for Wee Willie. He took the center of the stage and proceeded to spin the whole exciting yarn; while Perk stood there, his face expressing alternate

awe and then amusement. Several times when so far as Elmer could see there was no occasion for such a thing he seemed to be overwhelmed with a wild desire to laugh; which would end in a coughing fit, during which Wee Willie considerably "held up" his explanation.

"What can ail Perk?" Elmer was asking himself, unable to understand such unusual actions on the part of the chum who in times past had always been frankness itself. "He's certainly keeping *something* important back, meaning to give us all a surprise. I wonder what it is. He'll bear watching, I reckon, Perk will."

By degrees the story was told, down to the point where Elmer woke the other two up, to inform them his little trap had worked, and how Felix had taken himself off, unwilling to wait until those blue-coated guards from the big institution run by the State came along to renew acquaintance with "Doctor Hitchens."

"Well, you did have a thrilling experience for a fact," Perk blurted out in his customary breezy fashion, when Wee Willie finally subsided. "I should say it was a lucky thing he skipped out, and never tried to do you any harm. Ugh! I was always afraid of crazy people; they make me

feel cold through and through. So I'm mighty glad he saw your blaze, and not my little fire. Fancy spending a night alone in the woods with a wild man, watching to see when you went to sleep, so he could mebbe throttle you!"

"It was an experience none of us is likely to forget, for a fact," Elmer candidly admitted; "but we came through it all safe and sound, so we feel as if we had a lot to be thankful for."

"Now," remarked Perk, presently, "if a stranger came to my fire, and wanted to be taken in, I'd give him the glad hand; but all the same I'd ask him for his credentials. It isn't safe to believe everybody a friend in these parts, Wee Willie. You think you've got a story to tell that's going to make the fellows down Chester-way sit up and take notice. Well, I can match you, understand!"

"W-w-what's that, Perk?" stammered Wee Willie; while Elmer nodded his head as much as to say: "it's coming out now; go to it, Perk, old chum!"

"Why," said Perk, "you're not the only pebble on the beach; because I entertained a stranger at my fire last night, just the same as you did!"

CHAPTER XXIII

WHAT PERK DID

THE tall boy stared hard at Perk when he made that astonishing announcement.

“What! did he drop in on *you* too?” he gasped, and then added quickly: “but you just said you’d be wild if a crazy man came into camp. Perk, whatever are you giving us? It isn’t like you to yarn.”

“Oh! let me tell you,” continued the other, softly, like one who delighted in making hay while the sun shone; it wasn’t often Perk had a chance to whet the curiosity of his chums, and evidently he was bent on making the most of the present opportunity.

“Wish you would!” grumbled Wee Willie, looking unhappy because he was unable to see through the maze that confronted him, and understand just what that smirk on Perk’s round phiz meant.

“To go back,” remarked Perk, reminiscently, “I had managed to build a bully fire, and was getting nicely dried out. That was along about midnight, I should say. The storm was past,

and since the lightning had stopped except away off in the distance, I wasn't afraid any longer to occupy a hollow tree I'd marked down, and under which I found my wood-pile.

“Well, there I was, beginning to feel that life wasn't so tough a thing after all, when I heard some one calling. Oh! yes, it made me have a funny feeling I admit, because there I was away off by myself, alone in the flooded woods, with the trees still dripping, and the thunder growling in the distance.

“But I could tell that whoever it was trying to attract my attention he must be in some pain; and so I made up my mind it was up to me to start out and find him. That was the time, boys, I wished I had a gun along with me; for I remembered about that crazy man, and it didn't make me at all happy either.

“I went out, after fixing my fire so I could easy enough get back, if nothing grabbed me. He kept calling, and soon I came on him, trying his best to limp along. You see, he'd gone and sprained his ankle pretty badly, and couldn't bear to put that foot on the ground.

“That stirred me, I tell you, fellows. I tried to remember everything I'd ever been told about

sprains, and what was best to do for them. Come to look and I found that it was a bad injury, with his ankle a heap swollen; and, say, I bet you it hurt like everything; all of which was especially bad for him, because, well for a good reason.

“I made him lean on me, and step by step managed to get the poor chap over to my fire, where I stowed him on some branches I’d gone and gathered and dried out with the heat. Then I took off his shoe, and bathed his ankle with cold water from a little creek that was running bank-full close by.

“He said he felt a lot better afterwards, but kept groaning every once in a while, I didn’t know just why, except that he knew he’d probably not be able to walk decent for weeks again. That makes some difference to a fellow, I happen to know, because I’ve had a sprained ankle myself, and had to stay out of school for three whole weeks, using a cane afterwards.”

“Huh! that *was* a terrible time for you, Perk,” grunted Wee Willie, “and ever so many fellows saying they envied you the chance. But keep right along telling the details. Was he a dark-faced, wiry-looking chap; and could he talk like a house afire?”

“Not my visitor, Wee Willie. I hope now you don’t think I entertained that wild man, like you did?” Perk protested.

“Hardly possible,” said Elmer, “for he went away in the opposite direction to this; and besides, couldn’t have been at our fire until midnight, and then bobbed up away off here at the same time.”

“Just so,” continued Perk, sagaciously; and then went on to tell how he had arranged things for the comfort of his caller.

Elmer already “smelled a rat.” He began to see which way the wind was blowing, and could now understand why Perk had been casting so many queer glances in the direction of Amos. There was a *reason*, and a good one for this; and Elmer was now in a fair position to read between the lines as it were.

“Now I know,” broke in Wee Willie after a bit, “why you broke that cake of chocolate in two, and ate only half of it; you mean the rest for this fellow you’ve taken under your wing, eh, Perk?”

The other nodded eagerly.

“I’m sure he must be nearly as hungry as I am,” he explained, “though he said he wasn’t, and that he’d eaten a full supper last night, which

of course I didn't. But it wouldn't be fair for me to swallow the whole cake, so I'm saving his share."

"I believe you'd do the same for the worst scoundrel unhung, if he happened to fall into your hands, like this chap with the sprained ankle did," Elmer boldly told him. "You've got a heart as big as a bushel basket, Perk; and think of every one before yourself."

"But how anybody could do different, I can't for the life of me see," protested the other, simply.

By now Elmer believed he began to see light. Wee Willie, however, proved denser, for he was still wrestling with the problem in his mind, wondering who on earth it could be Perk had come upon so soon after the storm, and whose injuries he had attended to as best he knew how, with his limited knowledge of "first aid."

Amos, too, was hanging on every word that was spoken. Apparently he had also conceived some sort of plausible explanation for Perk's actions. When the latter found Amos so eagerly observing him, with that hungry light in his eyes, he hastily turned his head away. Elmer wondered why Perk did not seem to be embarrassed in any way, so he must conclude that the other simply

meant to enjoy their bewilderment as long as he reasonably could, before lifting the curtain and disclosing his secret to full view.

“It’s going to break right away,” Elmer told himself, confidently. “He just can’t hug that much longer to himself. Besides, Perk never could be cruel, even to an insect. Haven’t I seen him carefully step over an ants’ nest many a time, when other boys would carelessly trample it underfoot? And he’ll soon realize that in holding back he’s causing some one to suffer.”

So Elmer did not raise a hand to hasten the disclosure, content to let matters take their course. Wee Willie on his part now began to scent some wonderful mystery.

“See here, Perk,” he broke in, with an assumption of severity; “you’re trying to pull the wool over our eyes, for some reason or other, I guess. Now quit your kidding, and show us. Where’s your friend? Produce this man with the sprained ankle, won’t you, Perk? We’d all like to make his acquaintance, don’t you know? Here’s Elmer getting as impatient as anything, even if he doesn’t show it; and as for Amos, why he can hardly wait for you to lift the lid. I’m in the same box myself; so lead us to him, Perk!”

“He’s close by here, I want you to know,” explained the fat chum, chuckling in his mysterious way. “Mebbe you’ll be surprised to meet up with him. It might even be you’ll think I builded better than I suspected when I answered that call for help, and ventured out to find this poor chap.”

He was looking straight at Amos while saying this, though apparently speaking to Wee Willie. Amos was as white as a sheet, and his limbs seemed to be trembling under him, for some reason or other. There was also a pleading look in his eyes that made Perk squirm, and feel that he was displaying unnecessary cruelty in holding back as he did.

“Please, oh! please take us to him right away, won’t you, Perk?”

“That’s just what I’m going to do, Amos,” he replied. “So come along, all of you, and meet my friend, the man who doesn’t expect to walk for a whole month, because it happens to be his only good foot that’s knocked out of business, since he’s lame in the other!”

Saying which, he started the excited boys on a bee-line through the woods.

CHAPTER XXIV

WHEN THE SUN BROKE THROUGH

“THERE!”

That was all Perk could say as he gripped Amos's sleeve with a convulsive hand, and pointed beyond. His heart seemed to be up in his throat, threatening to choke him. But it was quite sufficient.

The man who had been reclining must have heard voices, for he was already struggling to a sitting posture. Amos took one look. The face was prematurely old, and just then wrinkled with physical pain; but the eyes of love may not be deceived long. With a sobbing cry Amos rushed forward.

“FATHER!” he cried in a choking voice, dropping beside the man, and throwing both arms about his neck.

The other boys stood stock still. Not one of them but who felt himself rendered dumb with the conflicting emotions that ran riot through brain and heart. They saw the tramp push Amos back to look hungrily into his eager face; and then

despite the anguish it must have caused him through that swollen ankle he almost fiercely squeezed the other to him, while tears ran down his sunburned cheeks.

The boys turned their faces away, feeling as though it might not be exactly a delicate thing for them to witness the holy joy that accompanied this meeting between their chum Amos and the father who had gone away seven years ago under a cloud, and whose family had believed him to be dead all this time, because he had failed to communicate with them.

Presently Amos called to them to come and meet his father. He seemed almost transformed, such was the happiness shown on his boyish face. Elmer could not believe it was the same sober-looking Amos whom he had come to know; the long-borne burden had been taken from the young shoulders, and thrown aside, never again to bow him down before his time.

So in turn they shook hands with Mr. Codling. He did not look so very much like a homeless tramp, Elmer quickly decided. Indeed, now that he forgot his suffering in the great peace and joy that had come to him, he seemed a very decent-looking and intelligent man indeed; and Elmer

liked the kind expression he could see in the returned wanderer's eyes.

"First of all," said Elmer, business clean through, "let's have a look at Perk's work. It's possible we may be able to better it; though I reckon he's done his level best."

To this the injured man made no remonstrance. Indeed, he could hardly tear his eyes from the face of Amos, who sat there beside him all the time Elmer and Wee Willie went about their work.

"Tell me about your mother, boy," the wanderer was saying, feverishly. "How is Amanda; yes, and the little ones? Did she take you to her aunt's as she promised? And oh! I am shivering for fear you may have bad news for me. I've stood a great deal, and tried to believe my punishment was just; but I hope there is no break in the family—that all are yet alive."

"It's all right, father," Amos hastened to tell him. "And you'll never in the wide world know Kittie and Louise, yes, and Peter, the baby you last saw. Why, just think of it, he's eight now, going to school, and mother says that every day he's getting to be more like you were when you first knew her."

This affected Mr. Codling greatly, for his face worked convulsively, though he also smiled through it all.

“Oh! if you only knew how I have suffered, son, all these years,” he went on to say, “but I would not break my vow. They should never see nor hear from me again unless I could wipe out the bitter past. But I am grateful to know that while I wandered the country over, always trying to rise above the level to which I had sunk, at least my dear ones have not suffered from want.”

“Believe me, mother will go wild with joy to see you again,” Amos told him.

The man, old beyond his years, looked pained at first.

“Do you think so, Amos?” he muttered, as though hardly daring to believe such good news. “It will take a terrible load off my heart when I am able to redeem the past, so far as a mere return of the lost money can ever make amends.”

Amos laughed.

“Don’t let it worry you, father,” he hastened to say. “That was all attended to long ago. Why, for more than six years now there hasn’t been the slightest thing against you; and Mr. Hastings never let it be known that he had lost a large sum

of money through your fault. So you see there has really been no publicity at all; in fact, these good chums of mine are the only ones who know about it; and they've promised never to let it go any further."

"But—I've been expecting all this time that the money would be paid over only through hard work on my part," stammered Mr. Codling, weakly; "and here, when I'm making my way back in the direction of my old home, meaning to wipe out my error, you're telling me there is nothing to be done. Whose money was it that settled the claim against me?"

"Oh! mother attended to all that, sir. Why, I believe the very first thing she did after her Aunt Letty died and left everything to us, was to hurry to see Mr. Hastings in the city, and arrange with him to take up his claim. So you see no outside assistance was needed; we took care of things right in the family, father."

"But—Aunt Letty wasn't so rich but that this must have sadly crippled your dear mother's resources, Amos," expostulated the man, suppressing a groan that might have been from mental pain, though Elmer and Wee Willie were gently handling his swollen ankle at the time.

“Oh! there was quite enough left, sir, to keep the wolf from the door,” the brave boy hastened to declare, though Elmer remembered him saying something that was quite different not so very long back.

“It is wonderful, simply wonderful!” murmured the wanderer, heaving a sigh of supreme contentment, such as probably had not passed his lips for seven long agonizing years. “To come back after this age and find that God has been so kind, so forgiving as to leave me all my dear ones. I can never be grateful enough to Him for these mercies. The hours will seem like years to me until I can look again into her blessed eyes, and hear her say that true love has survived it all.”

“If you knew how often she speaks to me of you, father, how many times I’ve found my mother crying to herself after the children were all in bed, you’d have no fear about that. Her one great dread was that you might be dead, and we’d never know about it at all.”

“I can see now how cruel, yes, and foolish, I was to bind myself by that vow, and keep from communicating with my family all this time. I might have been saved much suffering, and spared

her the same. But I believed I had almost broken her heart by my folly, and meant to punish myself in justice. A baffling Fortune gripped me, too; twice I was in almost good shape to come back and clear my name, when a sudden shift swept my savings away, and left me stranded again on the rocks."

"But it's all right now, father; and after we can get you down to Chester, the town where we are now living, you will soon be able to walk again."

"That's going to be a difficult job, I'm afraid, son," said the other, with a grimace, as though a pain reminded him just how badly off he was. "You see, I've always been under a handicap, with that one short leg; and now that the other is knocked out of business, I'm nearly helpless."

"Oh! leave that to my chums here, father," Amos cheerily told him. "They are master hands about doing things; and I reckon we'll soon be able to make some kind of litter on which we can carry you every step of the way."

"How fine of you to say that; and how proud I am of my boy! I only hope and pray that the bitter experiences through which I have passed may always serve as a guide-post to you through

life, warning you of the hidden perils when once wrong thoughts find entrance to the mind.”

Meanwhile Elmer and Wee Willie had done their best to ease the pain. A sprained ankle can be a thing of anguish, and its effects are often felt for many moons after it happens; indeed, most persons would really sooner endure a broken leg than such an affliction, since a fracture mends much quicker.

They found that Perk had done very well, considering his inexperience; his work was of course a bit bungling, though it had done wonders in easing the pain, and also helped keep down the swelling considerably.

“We’ll keep you quiet while up here with us, Mr. Codling,” Elmer told him; “and in a few days you’ll be in much better shape. Then, as Amos says, we’ll manage to rig up a stretcher, and carry you all the way to Chester; or else to some farm-house on the main road below, and phone for a car to meet us.”

“Thank you a thousand times, Elmer,” said the other, earnestly. “You are all splendid chaps, and I’m a fortunate man to find myself so well taken care of. I shall be counting the hours and minutes until I can see my family

again; but with Amos beside me, to answer all my questions, I'll try to rest content. Surely I have no reason to be unhappy, now that the clouds have rolled away, and the sun of peace is shining for me and mine again."

He smiled bravely, and Elmer had a faint suspicion there was a sparkle in his eyes that meant something. Just as he formerly guessed that Amos must be carrying a heavy and secret load on his young shoulders, from his serious manner, so Elmer now shrewdly decided that Mr. Codling was keeping something back, something which presently he would be springing as a surprise.

"The first thing we have to do is to get back to the cabin," Wee Willie suggested.

"You've said it," Elmer admitted, "and suppose you get busy with that good hatchet of yours, so we can make a temporary litter."

"Leave that to me," chuckled the tall chum, who really liked nothing better than to be thrown on his own resources, since it always served to bring out latent powers which he had hardly known he possessed, as well as wrought a sense of independence such as a progressive boy liked full well to feel.

He began chopping at small but sturdy second-growth ash saplings growing from the butt of a tree that had been thrown down in some previous storm, and soon had quite a collection on hand.

“Now, if you’ll help, Elmer,” he observed, “we’ll rig up a stretcher good enough for an emergency; though later on I’ll promise to better it in every way.”

To this Elmer agreed, and they had little trouble about carrying out the assignment. It was not a “thing of beauty, and a joy forever,” as Wee Willie candidly admitted, but then they would only require it for a short journey, and on that account it would hardly pay to go to any great trouble.

They lifted Mr. Codling on to this. Fortunately he was a small man, so the labor of transporting him would not be very great; and there was Amos only too willing to “spell” either of the litter-bearers.

Elmer considered well before making a start. He wished to be absolutely certain of his ground, since it would be too bad if they missed the cabin, and hence lengthened their tramp. Wee Willie also figured things out in his own mind; and from the way he wagged his head in appreciation, after

Elmer led off, it was plain that his judgment must be identical with that of his chum.

Amos talked almost incessantly, for he had a thousand things of interest to pour into the eager ears of his long-lost father. Mr. Codling never gave even the faintest groan during the entire journey, though there must have been times when he found himself jostled more or less, since the trail was rough, and the slightest jerk would probably send a thrill through his leg.

But his mind was filled with a peace that passed understanding. All the agonies of seven years had rolled away. Once more he looked ahead to happiness during the balance of his sad life. Only again and again across his face would come a look of intense yearning, as voluble Amos did his best to picture just how pretty Kitty, the twelve-year old girl, was growing, so like her mother too; and what a smart scholar Louise had turned out at school, a perfect genius, many said; while Peter, bless his heart, was the dearest little chap, of whom any parent could be proud.

It began to tell on the two boys after a while, but still they stubbornly refused to let Amos or Perk take a hand.

“You’re doing your part, Amos, walking be-

side the litter, and keeping your father's mind taken up with all those splendid things," said Elmer; "because I know we must joggle him sometimes, and every little jolt hurts a sprained ankle. We are getting along all right; and the cabin is close by now."

"I glimpsed the river through the trees just a minute back, anyhow," asserted Wee Willie, sturdily.

Amos looked at each in turn affectionately, Perk could see—Perk, who kept hovering alongside the tall chum, hinting again and again that he considered it "mean if they didn't intend to let him take a turn too."

"One thing sure, Amos," said Mr. Codling, warmly; "you're highly favored in your pals, for they're the greatest lot of boys I ever ran across!"

CHAPTER XXV

BACK AT THE CABIN AGAIN

“ELMER, you’re sure a wizard when it comes to finding your way through the tall timber!” cried Perk, presently; “because there’s our jolly old cabin dead ahead. Why, you came as straight as a bee could fly to its hive, after loading up with honey.”

“Nothing easier, once you get the hang of it,” laughed Elmer, pleased nevertheless because he had hit it so accurately; while Wee Willie also grinned, as though he considered that he also had occasion to pat himself on the back, seeing that he had fully agreed with Elmer’s deductions in the start.

All of them were delighted to see the cabin again. It may previously have appeared old and dilapidated in their eyes, but just now they forgot all that.

“Me to get a fire going,” roared Wee Willie, after Mr. Codling had been carried carefully into the shelter, and placed on one of the rude “springless beds,” as Perk called the blankets on the

floor, under each of which some hemlock browse had been placed so as to make things a bit more comfortable.

“What shall we have for our noonday repast, at eleven in the morning?” demanded Perk, almost beside himself with hunger.

“Better piece off with something that’s ready,” advised wise Elmer; “it would take too long to cook things, in our near-famished state, though of course a fire is necessary,”

“You just bet it is,” said Wee Willie, already bustling about outdoors in gathering the “fixings” for a blaze. “I’m nearly dead for a cup of coffee.”

“It will sure taste like nectar to all of us,” agreed Perk. “Well, if the rest of you say so, we’ll postpone the big meal till later on. Guess we’ll find plenty of stuff handy so as to take the edge off our ferocious appetites; and that’ll give me a chance to lay out a spread so as to make you sit up and take notice this evening.”

They were soon as busy as beavers, hastening back and forth, while the injured man lay there and followed each one with his eyes. Whenever Amos came near how his gaze would fasten hungrily on the boy! It was as if Mr. Codling almost

feared this might all be on a par with some of the dreams he had had during his long exile from home; and that he would suddenly wake up, to find himself back under the old distressing conditions.

Presently the delightful fumes of boiling coffee filled the air, and every one commenced sniffing eagerly, as though this excited them almost beyond restraint.

“All ready here!” sang out Perk, in his cheery fashion; “gather round the festive board, and get busy!”

Amos would not dream of eating a bite until he had fetched his father’s breakfast to him. It gave the boy unlimited happiness to be able to wait on the one whose homecoming he knew would make his mother feel so joyous.

Presently all of them admitted they were a hundred per cent better off than before; that “tired feeling” had vanished under the magical influence of the Java; and the sandwiches which Perk made from bread and butter, some cheese, and bits of ham which had been left over at their last regular meal. Then there were crackers of several sorts, which could be used to “fill up the chinks” as Perk put it; so that in the end every one confessed that it was impossible for him to eat another bite.

Mr. Codling continued to smile at times in that queer way.

“Guess he won’t be able to hold it in much longer,” Elmer told himself, “whatever it can be. Twice now I’ve seen him open his mouth as if to speak, and then shut it again, with a little shake of the head. But it’s bound to come out, and I reckon he means to give Amos a little surprise.”

None of them felt much like doing anything of importance that afternoon, for they had had so little sleep during the preceding night that they were tired and heavy-eyed.

Perk, yielding to his special hobby, did go over to a certain spot on the river bank, and fish for an hour or so during the afternoon; with such good luck that they were assured of a fine mess of perch and bass for supper. He set to work cleaning his catch, an operation which Wee Willie did not attempt to interrupt. That was always a nice thing about Wee Willie; when he saw that any one felt really happy in doing a job for which he himself had no great hankering, he would never attempt to ask a division of the labor. And so Perk not only caught his fish, but made them ready for the pan, and would in probability also do the cooking

in the bargain. There never was a more good-natured and willing chum than Perk, as Wee Willie often told himself, with one of his grins; and it is also to be hoped he fully appreciated those winning qualities in the stout youth.

The supper was a grand success.

Perk "blew" himself for the occasion, as he called it, and really prepared enough for two-thirds of a dozen instead of just five mouths.

"Huh! you never *can* tell in these queer times when you're going to have company drop in on you," he remonstrated, when Elmer mildly expressed his surprise at the enormous amount that came to their rough-and-ready table. "Only last night you entertained one stranger at your fire; while I had Mr. Codling pop in on me unexpected like. Then remember how those two guards from the asylum came tapping, tapping at our cabin door the first night we were here? So I believe in preparedness. An ounce of prevention is worth more'n a pound of cure. If anybody should step in, all we've got to do is to say 'sit down, and fill up, friends!' "

Nevertheless when the meal was through it was really surprising how little had been left; for their appetites seemed capable of stretching in a

remarkable way, and Wee Willie acted as though he could never reach his limit.

“I declare,” he confessed, after a fourth helping to the stew Perk had concocted from canned beef, succotash, and some cold potatoes, “I’m beginning to suspect my legs must be hollow all the way down, because how else could I stow away what I’ve devoured?”

And after that, of course, Wee Willie might expect to have a deal of fun poked at him in connection with his queer anatomy.

They ate supper inside the cabin, so as to be near Mr. Codling; though of course such old campers as Wee Willie and Elmer, perhaps Perk in the bargain, would have preferred sitting outdoors, so long as the weather was fine, and the “skeeters” not too vicious.

At last, the tin dishes and cups had all been washed up in thorough fashion, Elmer and Wee Willie insisting on doing that unpleasant part of the dining program; though Perk protested that he always did like to “splash things around,” and had even fetched a new dish-mop along to try out; but they elbowed him aside unceremoniously, the tall chum saying commandingly:

“Here, you clear out, Perk! Think we’re going

to let you have a monopoly of this business? Guess the rest of us want to keep our hands in, don't we? You'll be boasting, when we get home, you just ran the whole camp; and we don't want to get the laugh on us. Now forget it, and talk with Mr. Codling. You know all his folks down home, and can tell him Amos doesn't overshoot the mark when he says little Peter is a darling, ditto—Louise, and—yes, Kitty in the bargain."

At that Amos had to smile, because the said Kitty was a big girl for her years, and Wee Willie had been known to fetch her flowers, even a box of candy on one occasion, when she passed her twelfth birthday; he also had a tacit understanding with Kitty to "beau" her to the first barn dance the next Winter, if her mother considered her old enough to attend such jolly gatherings.

Mr. Codling waited until they were all gathered together later on, with the "chores" completed, and the decks cleared. Then he spoke up, just as Elmer had been anticipating would be the case.

"I've got something to say to you, Amos," he remarked first of all; and though his voice trembled, Elmer made sure that it was only through joy, and not because there was any further cause for lingering regrets.

“All right, father,” the boy immediately said, coming to the side of the speaker, and bending over; “I’m ready to tell you anything you want to know, so don’t hold back. I haven’t got a thing to keep from you, remember.”

“But this is something that concerns me, first of all, my boy,” continued the other. “Listen then. You know I vowed never to come back unless I found myself able to take up that terrible debt of mine, and face the world again as an honest man. Yes, and I told you how twice I slipped back after I believed myself on the road to fortune. Well, three turned out to be the magical number with me, Amos; in Alaska I struck rich pay dirt, and I’ve come back with all the money we shall ever need again in this world!”

CHAPTER XXVI

LOOKING FORWARD—CONCLUSION

No one said a word for a full minute, though Wee Willie and Elmer and big-hearted Perk exchanged glowing looks, and happy nods, as if the great news pleased them beyond measure.

Amos, with swimming eyes, bent over, and laid a hand on his father's shoulder. There was simple affection in the act, and nothing more.

"I'm sure glad to hear that, father," he said as well as he could; "for it'll make you a whole lot better satisfied; but you'd be just as welcome home if you didn't have a nickel."

"That's the best part of it," observed Mr. Codling, "and what makes me so satisfied with the wonderful way things have turned out. But I worked, and prayed, and in the end hit it rich, so that when I sold out my claim in the new diggings I had a sum that was more than I ever expected to realize, even in my wildest dreams."

Taken in all, that was a most happy evening for them. How the sound of those fresh young voices as they sang their favorite songs made Mr.

Codling shut his eyes and dream of past days, when he took Amanda Green to singing-school evenings. Again he could in imagination hear her sweet voice in carols of the times, as the scroll of the past was unrolled before his mental vision.

“By all odds this has been the happiest evening I ever spent, barring none,” he assured Elmer when, later on, they gave up singing and began to make arrangements for sleeping. “In other days I never realized my blessings half enough; but now that I’ve passed through the valley of humiliation things look vastly different to me. Thank you again for the pleasure it has given me to hear you sing. And I’m very glad my boy has such a promising voice, because music used to be my one passion—in those other days, you know.”

They were shy one blanket, now that they had a guest. Mr. Codling understood how he had been given Elmer’s spread, and started to protest; but he was speedily “sat down upon,” as Wee Willie expressed it in his boyish vernacular.

“Elmer’s going to share my blanket, don’t you see, sir?” the attenuated chum blustered, before his mate could say a word. “I’m so thin I don’t take up half the room Perk here does. Besides,

it's summer weather, and shucks! any fellows as used to camping out as we are don't need to bother much about coverings; this hemlock stuff is good enough for me."

So it was arranged, and during the balance of their stay at Long Cabin Bend Elmer and Wee Willie expected to share the latter's blanket, which fortunately enough was of unusually generous proportions.

During the night, after the late moon arose, and it was partly light inside the cabin, Elmer, waking, saw Amos sitting up and looking steadily toward the spot where his father lay. He could easily understand the deep emotion that must possess the boy, as after a vivid dream he was hardly able to bring himself to believe the wonderful thing could be true.

So the night passed, and another day dawned.

All were stirring early, for they had laid out many things to be accomplished between sunrise and the coming of night.

While Perk "wrestled" with breakfast, beaming with delight because he actually loved to cook, Elmer took another look at Mr. Codling's ankle, Amos hovering near, eager to be of any service.

"It's doing as well as can be expected," was

the comment of Elmer. "These things are never over with in a hurry; it takes time, and a lot of patience to recover from a sprain. If I was down home I could help things along some by rubbing a certain liniment on, that's the boss thing for sprains. But you'll have to make up your mind to keep quiet up here, sir."

"I suppose so, Elmer," said the patient, with a sigh, "and I oughtn't to have a word of complaint. In fact, I'm too happy after having heard the good news from Amos that my little family is well, to think of grumbling. The whole thing seems almost like a page taken from a book—my making up my mind to play the part of a tramp as I drew closer to my old home, partly because I was afraid of discovering that something dreadful had happened to my dear ones; and also because I did not know but that there might be a warrant out for my apprehension, which troubled me more or less.

"Then came the storm, and my misfortune, which I thought terrible; yet it brought me in touch with Perk here, and finally the rest of you. Oh! if only I had dreamed that Amos was one of your number, while I hung around the cabin, waiting for a chance to recover my lost knife, how

gladly would I have made my identity known. But, after all, it's come out ten times better than I ever hoped for; and I'd be an ingrate to complain."

However eager he may have felt to be heading toward Chester, where those dear ones lived from whom he had been separated so long, Mr. Codling grimly resolved not to let Elmer and his chums see his distress of mind. He felt that it would be a shame to cause these fine lads to cut their camping trip in the tall timber short on his account.

But Elmer was revolving a scheme over in his mind, which he confided to Wee Willie on the sly; and the latter as usual declared that it "filled the bill to a dot."

Without letting the others know what he was doing the tall chum busied himself that very afternoon, away from the camp, making his stretcher, on which the injured man could be carried out of the woods. Elmer proposed that they leave their things in the cabin, manage on the following day to get to some farm-house on the Crawford Notch road, and either make an arrangement with the owner to take Mr. Codling to town in a rig, or else 'phone for a car to come up and get him.

Of course, the devoted Amos could not dream

of being absent when the wanderer arrived, and so he would accompany his father, to enjoy the wild delight that was sure to overwhelm the Codling home.

He could return in a day or two, if his yearning for taking flashlight pictures still gripped him, which Elmer believed would be the case; and so spend the balance of their vacation with his chums.

“It’s ten whole days till school takes up, you know,” Wee Willie had remarked, when he and Elmer talked this over. “Plenty of time for us to have all sorts of bully adventures. And if we think it a good plan, while we’re down at that farmer’s place to-morrow, what’s to hinder our laying in a fresh stock of grub?”

“Not a thing, that I can see,” agreed his comrade, nodding his head.

“Some of these farmers have heaps of good things laid away for winter,” proceeded Wee Willie, who was hungry, it may be assumed, at that very minute; “so, as long as we’ve got the hard cash still in our treasury, after selling our stock of ginseng roots to that firm in St. Louis we might as well do things up brown. We can fetch back a lot of fresh eggs, mebbe a home-cured ham, several

live chickens for feast days, and if he's got any *honey* Perk'd be almost tickled to death to have it to go with his flapjacks; because, mebbe we'll never have any luck locating a bee-tree while up here."

All of which goes to prove what every one knows to be a fact, that with the vast majority of boys the best part of camping consists of the "eats." But in that respect boys do not differ greatly from those much more mature in years, since the natural man comes to the surface as soon as the primeval wilderness takes the place of civilized comforts.

When that night the subject was broached, Amos showed his sincere appreciation for his chums' consideration.

"This is mighty fine of you, boys," he mumbled, thickly, at the same time looking so very happy; "and you can bank on it I'll hurry back here to stay the balance of our vacation—after I've seen father safe home, and just hung around a day or so to enjoy the situation."

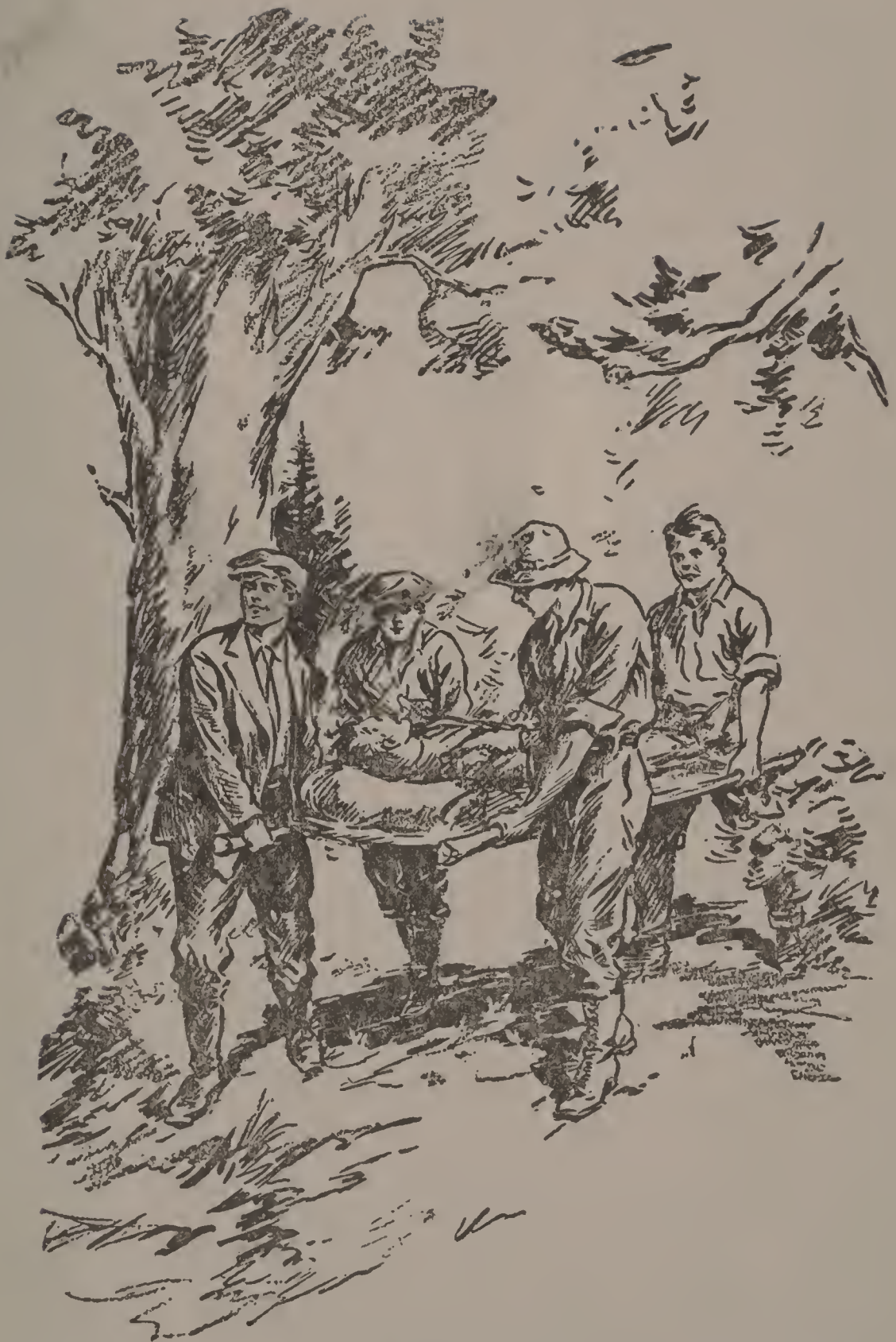
Mr. Codling tried weakly to protest, saying that he was already giving them too much trouble; and that another day lost would cut into the

glorious time they had been anticipating; but they would not let him proceed.

“It’s all fixed up, sir, so our plans can’t be changed now,” Wee Willie assured him. “I’ve been making my stretcher on the sly, and I’ll show it to you after a bit. Besides, the sooner we get you down home the better for everybody. We can understand how wild Amos here is to have his mother know the good news, and if we can manage it, you’ll both be there by this time to-morrow night.”

The many things the boys had planned to do while in camp could wait until their duty to Mr. Codling and their chum had been fulfilled. Amos, of course, would insist on leaving his camera and flashlight apparatus behind when he took his father home. In this way he would be drawn to rejoin them later, so as to pursue those novel and interesting studies of shy wild animal life which seemed to be taking such a firm hold upon him latterly.

This program was carried out to the letter, for as luck would have it the weather proved favorable on the following morning. They closed the cabin again, and all started forth. Mr. Codling found the litter much more comfortable than the



Mr. Codling found the litter much more comfortable.

rough-and-ready one upon which he had made the trip from the big hollow tree at Perk's woodland camp, to the cabin.

By taking things easy, and changing stretcher-bearers frequently, as one or the other showed signs of tiring out, they managed to reach the road, and later on a farm-house where the owner agreed to use his own old car to take Amos and his injured parent to Chester.

The last Elmer, Wee Willie and Perk saw of them they were waving their hands wildly from the "tin Lizzie" as the car started noisily down the road leading to Chester, some twenty-three miles distant, by way of Crawford Notch.

"Well," said Perk, after they started back to the cabin, carrying the supplies purchased from the farmer on the stretcher, "that winds up one of the most thrilling happenings that ever came our way. As long as I live I'll never forget how I fetched him to my fire, and then discovered that it was Amos's long missing dad. But it's all right now, boys."

"Yes," chimed in Wee Willie, merrily, "everything is lovely and the goose hangs high. Just to think of it, how bully things turned out, with him fetching back a regular fortune with him, or

papers to show he's got it in bank up there in Alaska, which means the same thing."

"Beats any movie picture I ever stared at with goggle-eyes," Perk went on to confess, with his customary frankness; and then gave a sigh, adding: "but it's all over now, and I reckon the rest of our stay up here will be just along the usual humdrum lines of camping. Still, we have to eat, so I'll have my chance for getting up new and novel dishes to try on the dog."

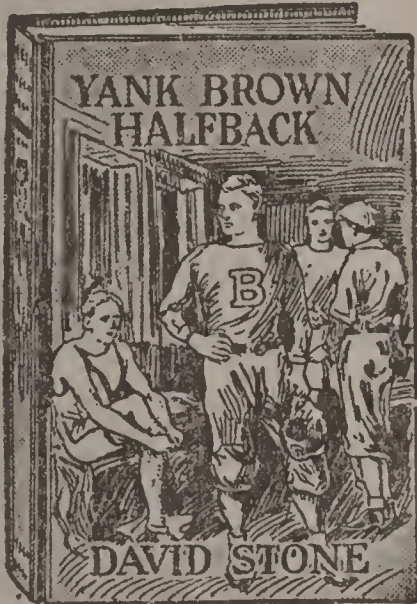
The others only laughed to hear him talk; for they knew Perk too well to feel offended at anything he said. But, indeed, Perk need not have feared a humdrum existence, if only he could have lifted the curtain of the immediate future.

And if the reader feels any curiosity to learn about how Wee Willie startled his camp-mates with a *mutiny*; as well as the strange series of thrilling events that made their further stay in the wilderness something never to be forgotten, all this and much more will be found detailed at length in the volume that follows this, under the suggestive title of "*The Camp Fire Boys in Muskrat Swamp; or, A Hunt for the Missing 'Plane Pilot.*"

The Yank Brown Series

By DAVID STONE

Cloth, large 12 mo. Illustrated.



When Yank Brown comes to Belmont College as a callow Freshman, there is a whole lot that he doesn't know about college life, such as class rushes, rivalries, fraternities, and what a lowly Freshman must not do. But he does know something about how to play football, and he is a big, likeable chap who speedily makes friends.

In the first story of this series we watch Yank buck the line as a Halfback. In the second story he goes in for basketball, among many other activities of a busy college year. Then there are other stories to follow—each brimful of action and interest. This is one of the best college series we have seen in a long while.

YANK BROWN, HALFBACK

YANK BROWN, FORWARD

YANK BROWN, CROSS-COUNTRY
RUNNER

BARSE & HOPKINS

NEWARK
N. J.

NEW YORK
N. Y.

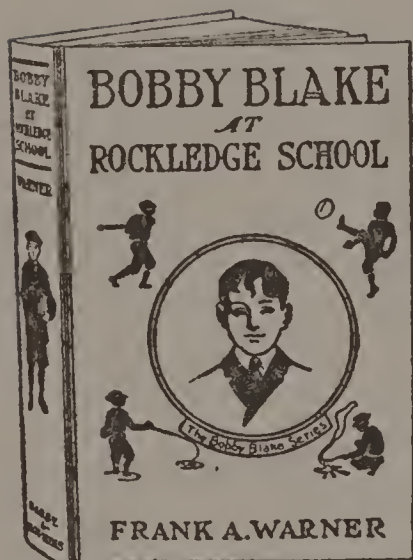
(Other volumes in preparation.)

THE BOBBY BLAKE SERIES

BY FRANK A. WARNER

BOOKS FOR BOYS

From eight to twelve years old



True stories of life at a modern American boarding school. Bobby attends this institution of learning with his particular chum and the boys have no end of good times. The tales of outdoor life, especially the exciting times they have when engaged in sports against rival schools, are written in a manner so true, so realistic, that the reader, too, is bound to share with these boys their thrills and pleasures.

- 1 BOBBY BLAKE AT ROCKLEDGE SCHOOL.
- 2 BOBBY BLAKE AT BASS COVE.
- 3 BOBBY BLAKE ON A CRUISE.
- 4 BOBBY BLAKE AND HIS SCHOOL CHUMS.
- 5 BOBBY BLAKE AT SNOWTOP CAMP.
- 6 BOBBY BLAKE ON THE SCHOOL NINE.
- 7 BOBBY BLAKE ON A RANCH.
- 8 BOBBY BLAKE ON AN AUTO TOUR.
- 9 BOBBY BLAKE ON THE SCHOOL ELEVEN.
- 10 BOBBY BLAKE ON A PLANTATION.

BARSE & HOPKINS

New York, N. Y.

Newark, N. J.

THE GO AHEAD BOYS

BY ROSS KAY.

*I leave this rule for others when I'm dead:
Be always sure you're right—THEN GO AHEAD.*

—Davy Crockett's Motto.



The love of adventure is inborn in all normal boys. Action is almost a supreme demand in all the stories they read with most pleasure. Here is presented a series of rattling good adventure stories which every live "go ahead" boy will read with unflagging interest. There is action, dash and snap in every tale yet the tone is healthful and there is an underlying vein of resourcefulness and strength that is worth while.

- 1 THE GO AHEAD BOYS ON SMUGGLERS' ISLAND.
- 2 THE GO AHEAD BOYS AND THE TREASURE CAVE.
- 3 THE GO AHEAD BOYS AND THE MYSTERIOUS OLD HOUSE.
- 4 THE GO AHEAD BOYS IN THE ISLAND CAMP.
- 5 THE GO AHEAD BOYS AND THE RACING MOTOR BOAT.
- 6 THE GO AHEAD BOYS AND SIMON'S MINE.

(Other volumes in preparation)

Cloth, Large 12mo., Illustrated.

BARSE & HOPKINS

PUBLISHERS

Newark, N. J.

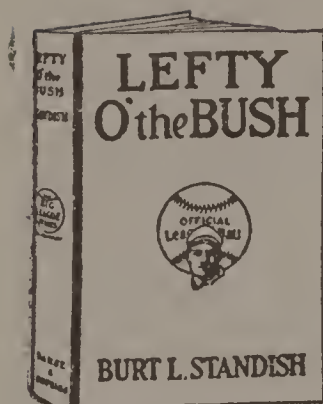
New York, N. Y.

"As Popular as the Game Itself"

THE BIG LEAGUE SERIES

(Trade Mark Registered)

BY BURT L. STANDISH.



Endorsed by such stars of baseballdom as Christy Mathewson, Ty Cobb and Walter Johnson.

An American boy with plenty of grit—baseball at its finest—and the girl in the case—these are the elements which compose the most successful of juvenile fiction. You don't have to be a "fan" to enjoy these books; all you need to be is really human and alive with plenty of red blood in your veins.

The author managed a "Bush League" team a number of years ago and is thoroughly familiar with the actions of baseball players on and off the field. Every American, young or old, who has enjoyed the thrills and excitement of our national game, is sure to read with delight these splendid stories of baseball and romance.

- 1 LEFTY O' THE BUSH.
- 2 LEFTY O' THE BIG LEAGUE.
- 3 LEFTY O' THE BLUE STOCKINGS.
- 4 LEFTY O' THE TRAINING CAMP.
- 5 BRICK KING, BACKSTOP.
- 6 THE MAKING OF A BIG LEAGUER.
- 7 COURTNEY OF THE CENTER GARDEN.
- 8 COVERING THE LOOK-IN CORNER.
- 9 LEFTY LOCKE, PITCHER-MANAGER.
- 10 GUARDING THE KEYSTONE SACK.
- 11 THE MAN ON FIRST.

Cloth, Large 12mo., Illustrated,

BARSE & HOPKINS

PUBLISHERS

Newark, N. J.

New York, N. Y.

THE BOY SCOUT LIFE SERIES

Published with the approval of
The Boy Scouts of America



In the boys' world of story books, none better than those about boy scouts arrest and grip attention. In a most alluring way, the stories in the BOY SCOUT LIFE SERIES tell of the glorious good times and wonderful adventures of boy scouts.

All the books were written by authors possessed of an intimate knowledge of this greatest of all movements organized for the welfare of boys, and are published with the approval of the National Headquarters of the Boy Scouts of America.

The Chief Scout Librarian, Mr. F. K. Mathiews, writes concerning them: "It is a bully bunch of books. I hope you will sell 100,000 copies of each one, for these stories are the sort that help instead of hurt our movement."

THE BOY SCOUT FIRE FIGHTERS — *CRUMP*

THE BOY SCOUTS OF THE LIGHTHOUSE TROOP —
McLANE

THE BOY SCOUT TRAIL BLAZERS — *CHELEY*

THE BOY SCOUT TREASURE HUNTERS — *LERRIGO*

BOY SCOUTS AFLOAT — *WALDEN*

BOY SCOUTS COURAGEOUS — *MATHIEWS*

BOY SCOUTS TO THE RESCUE — *LERRIGO*

BOY SCOUTS ON THE TRAIL — *GARTH*

BARSE & HOPKINS
PUBLISHERS

Newark, N. J.

New York, N. Y.

THE TOMLINSON SERIES

BY EVERETT T. TOMLINSON.



Interest in school life is perpetual. The young student, facing new surroundings, finds an element of romance and strong appeal; and to the older graduate college days recall some of the most pleasant memories of the past.

Here are stories of school life and athletics, full of action and human interest. They deal with problems of life common to students and inspire the manly attributes of self-reliance and strength of character.

THE PENNANT.

CAPTAIN DAN RICHARDS.

CARL HALL OF TAIT.

JACK STONE OF TAIT SCHOOL.

(Other volumes in preparation)

Cloth, Large 12mo., Illustrated.

BARSE & HOPKINS

PUBLISHERS

Newark, N. J.

New York, N. Y.





LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



00020733299

